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The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten

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“It feels a little embarrassing, but I’m happy.”
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“Sorry to keep
you waiting…
How do I look?”

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The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten

Amane Fujimiya

A student who began living alone when he started high school. He's poor at every type of housework and lives a slovenly life. Has a low opinion of himself and tends to put himself down, but is kind at heart.

Mahiru Shiina

A classmate who lives in the apartment next door to Amane. The most beautiful girl in school; everyone calls her an "angel." Started cooking for Amane because she couldn't overlook his unhealthy lifestyle.

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The Angel Next Door Spoils Me Rotten, Vol. 5

Saekisan

TRANSLATION BY NICOLE WILDER * COVER ART BY HANEKOTO

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OTONARI NO TENSHISAMA NI ITSUNOMANIKA DAMENINGEN NI SARETEITA KEN Vol. 5
Copyright © 2021 Saekisan
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Original Japanese edition published in 2021 by SB Creative Corp.
This English edition is published by arrangement with SB Creative Corp., Tokyo, in care of Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2023 by Yen Press, LLC

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Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: February 2023
Edited by Yen On Editorial: Shella Wu, Ivan Liang
Designed by Yen Press Design: Liz Parlett

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Saekisan, author. | Hanekoto, illustrator. | Wilder, Nicole. translator.
Title: The angel next door spoils me rotten / Saekisan ; illustration by Hanekoto ; translation by Nicole Wilder.
Other titles: Otonari no tenshi-sama ni Itsu no ma ni ka dame ningen ni sareteita ken. English
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2020– |
Identifiers: LCCN 2020043583 | ISBN 9781975319236 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975322694 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975333409 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975344405 (v. 4 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975348274 (v. 5 ; trade paperback)
Subjects: CYAC: Love—Fiction.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.S2413 An 2020 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020043583

ISBNs: 978-1-975-3-4827-4 (paperback)
978-1-9753-4828-1 (ebook)

E3-20230111-JV-NF-ORI

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Afterword

Chapter 1

The Day After the Confession

Mahiru and I are dating.

If he was to put it into words, he could have summarized it in that one short sentence, but Amane's heart was overflowing with so much emotion that he could barely string a thought together.

The night after the confession, after Mahiru had returned to her own apartment, Amane had found himself feeling restless and in a dreamy haze.

He shared a new bond with his first love: the girl he'd fallen head over heels for. It made sense that he would be ecstatic.

It really hadn't been that long since they'd first met—just over half a year—and yet, having spent those days pining away, so close to the object of his unrequited love, it had felt like a very long time indeed.

Shortly after the beginning of the new year, Amane realized he had feelings for Mahiru, meaning he had spent about four months in such a state.

Whether it had been "just four months" or "four long months" depended on perspective, but for Amane, it felt like forever. The saying goes that "first love bears no fruit," but in Amane and Mahiru's case, that didn't seem to apply.

Amane was happy that they were together now, but without the slightest bit of experience, he had no idea what he ought to do next. He didn't know how he should act around her the following day.

Kept awake all night by a combination of joy and apprehension, Amane was rather sleep-deprived when he welcomed Mahiru into his apartment the day after they confessed to each other.

"…Um, g-good morning."

Mahiru, who had come to say good morning at an hour much closer to the afternoon, was wearing a big smile that completely failed to hide the fact that she felt just as awkward as Amane.

The day after Sports Day was a school holiday, so it wasn't unusual for Mahiru to come over. She had visited frequently before they started dating, too, so it wasn't particularly strange. She was a familiar figure at home.

What had changed was the feeling of distance between them, thanks to their new relationship. It somehow seemed like they were further apart compared to before.

Normally, because she was so used to it, Mahiru would walk through the door like it was her own house, making herself at home, but…today, she seemed somehow tense.

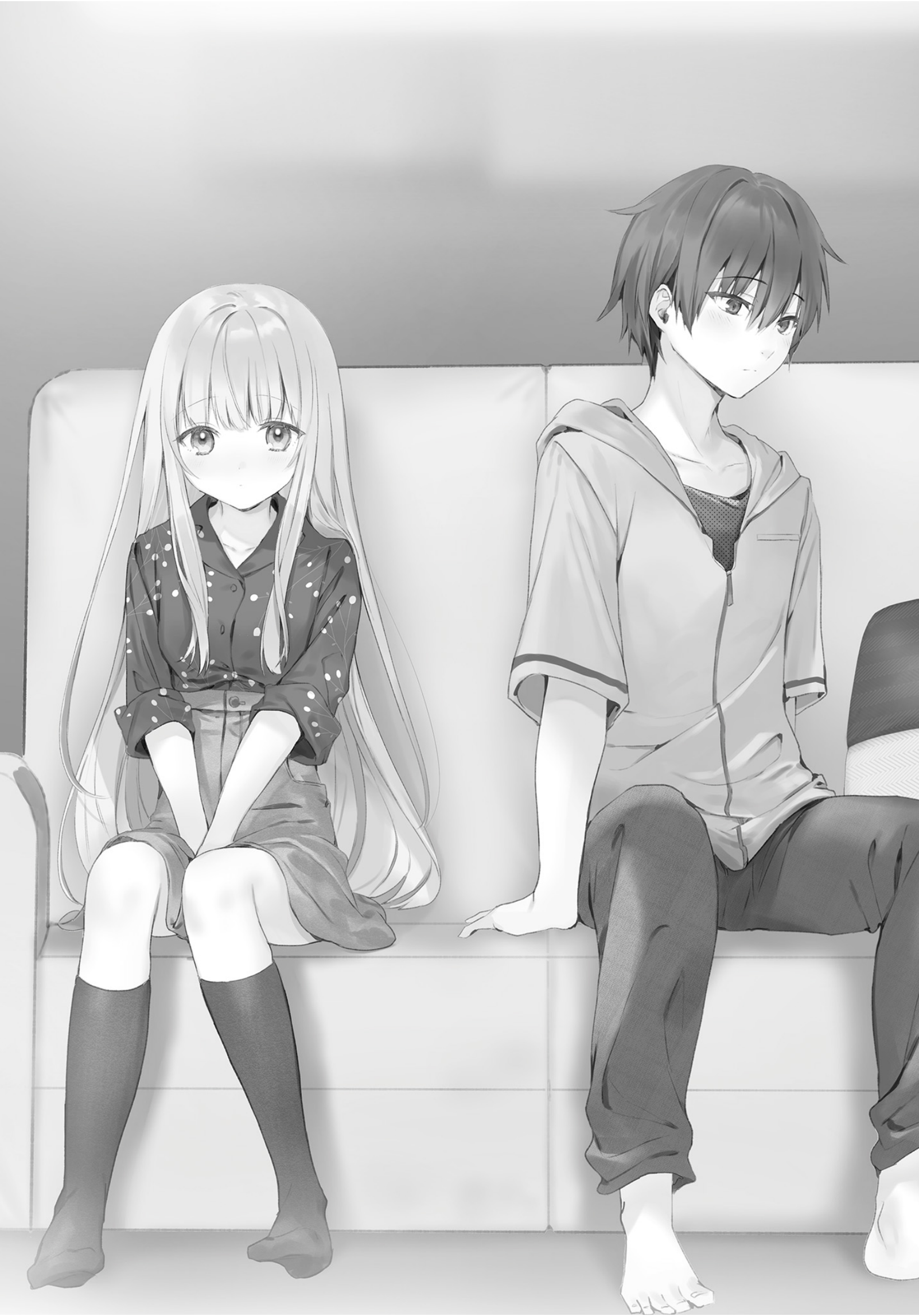
However, Amane's nervousness was much worse. He couldn't even muster his usual lighthearted greeting and instead let his eyes wander nervously around the room as he finally managed to reply in a quiet voice, "…Morning."

Then they both took their seats on the living room sofa, leaving a wider-than-usual space between them.

"Um… A-Amane-kun, you look a little sleepy."

"Yeah, well…how do I put this? I was so happy that I couldn't really sleep," Amane mumbled, sounding flustered.

Mahiru's cheeks became redder, as if she knew exactly what he meant. "I—I must be pretty carefree, since I slept quite well, feeling happy and fortunate…"



“N-no, I think that’s great! I just—I was thinking about all sorts of things and was too worked up, like a little kid the night before a field trip!”

“…So you’re happy, too?”

“Well, yeah… Of course I am, now that I know the girl I like feels the same way… I’m so happy that my head can’t stop spinning.”

Amane had never done this sort of thing before, so he was practically trembling with joy at the idea that the person he liked reciprocated his feelings. However, he still had no idea how he should act toward Mahiru. He was at a total loss.

His parents’ relationship wasn’t a good reference, either.

Amane did think the two of them got along better than average, maybe even a little too well. Even though they only did so inside the house, they were openly affectionate. Amane felt like trying to use his parents as an example would only lead to embarrassment.

So Amane was wrestling with the problem of how to act toward his new girlfriend as he answered. Mahiru put on a soft, effortless smile and started to lean on Amane, so—without thinking—he grabbed her shoulder and stopped her.

Mahiru’s expression stiffened immediately, and Amane knew that he had messed up. He pulled back the hand that he’d put up to stop her and waved it in front of his face.

“Th-that’s not— It’s not that I don’t want to… Just, it’s like, I feel awkward again, about getting close to you. When you go for it so suddenly, somehow it’s kind of embarrassing, don’t you think?”

He tacked on the lame question at the end because he was uncomfortable.

They had been close enough to touch plenty of times before, to the point where it had become normal, but now that their relationship had changed, sitting at the usual distance somehow made Amane nervous.

It wasn’t that he hadn’t felt embarrassed before, but now that his perception of Mahiru had changed, he was overly conscious of her.

“…When I think about you being my girlfriend, I can’t settle down. It’s my first time dating anyone, and…”

“I mean, it’s not like I’m perfectly composed, either, but…I guess my feeling of wanting to stay close is stronger. N-now that we’ve finally started dating…I think it’s best if we are honest about our feelings.”

Mahiru’s voice trembled with slight bashfulness as she mumbled those words, looking up at Amane timidly. The effect was so charming that Amane stifled his groan.

“So could I get a little…closer?” she asked.

"…Feel free."

If he was being honest, Amane wanted nothing more than to grab Mahiru and squeeze her tightly like a stuffed animal, to revel in the joy that was welling up inside of him. But he had a feeling that if he allowed himself to do that, he might end up doing something really embarrassing and regret it afterward, so he decided to limit himself to light cuddling.

Mahiru seemed to be happy with it, as she leaned against Amane's arm with a cherubic look of joy on her smiling face.

As a matter of fact, even before they had started dating, Mahiru had recently become quite clingy. The fact that he felt more nervous about it than he had before was probably because he lacked both courage and experience in these situations.

…I wonder what I should do now?

He worried over whether just cuddling was enough.

Amane had zero dating experience, and Mahiru was his first girlfriend.

Mahiru was in the same situation, but still, Amane couldn't help but want to take the lead, as a guy.

But as much as he wanted to take the initiative, he had no idea how.

Partly because of what had happened to him in the past, Amane had never shown a lot of interest in others, and since he'd never been much of a romantic, he'd never even dreamed about dating a girl. Sadly, Amane's energy had always been directed toward his studies and hobbies, and he completely lacked any knowledge when it came to the essential subject of romance.

Amane's meager understanding was limited to the fact that boys and girls who were dating held hands, went on dates, and kissed—and might get more physical once their relationship became more serious.

Aside from holding hands and going on dates, he couldn't even imagine suddenly kissing her—or doing anything else, for that matter. So Amane settled on the idea that they should go out, but he knew that that alone wasn't really "dating."

Amane wanted to make Mahiru happy, and for the two of them to be happy together, but he felt slightly hopeless at the realization that he had absolutely no idea how to go about it.

"…What's the matter?" Mahiru asked. "D-do you not like me leaning on you after all…?"

"Ah, no, that's not it. Sorry for making you worry."

Mahiru was staring at Amane, who had been silently fretting with a serious look on his face. He felt pathetic for giving her the wrong idea that he didn't like feeling her touch.

“I was just wondering about something… Well, I think I can probably ask you, since it involves you, too…”

“S-sure.”

Amane felt bad about asking her, since this was her first time dating anyone as well, but he decided it might be good to consult with her, as fellow first timers. Surely it was better to talk things through together, rather than worrying alone.

“So listen, we, um… We’ve started dating, but…”

“Yes?”

“…Now that we are, what, specifically, should we do?”

“Huh?”

Mahiru had obviously been bracing herself, unsure of what kind of question was headed her way. She looked surprised.

Even though Amane was self-conscious about asking such a stupid question, even for him, he was asking earnestly.

“…W-well, it’s my first time dating anyone, and…I don’t know exactly what we’re supposed to do.”

“…N-now that you mention it…,” she replied.

But as he had expected, Mahiru, who had also never had much experience with the opposite sex, was similarly stumped by Amane’s conundrum.

“Does anything come to mind?”

“…Holding hands?”

“We do that all the time.”

“Spending days off together?”

“That’s every day.”

“Going out?”

“Well, we’ve been doing that.”

“Hugging?”

“We do that.”

Unfortunately, it seemed that Mahiru didn’t know any more than Amane, and everything she brought up was something they’d already done. She couldn’t come up with anything more that couples were supposed to do together. It seemed like there was nothing else.

What do couples do…?

Amane sighed, and Mahiru tugged nervously at the hem of his shirt. When he looked at her again, wondering what was wrong, he saw that her face was flushed slightly red.

"…So it's hard to say this, or rather, it's embarrassing, but… Haven't we been doing all the things that couples do together, just without calling it dating…?"

After Mahiru said that, a silence fell over the room.

...Now that she's said it out loud... No, even if she hadn't said anything, she's right...!

They had been spending time in the same space, holding hands, and going out together as if it was totally natural, but those were things that boys and girls normally did when they were in a relationship.

Of course, even though it might have been clear at first, maybe he hadn't realized that these activities had become entirely commonplace for them.

"I—I also wanted you to notice me, and I did my very best to make it happen, but…when I really think about it, Amane-kun, I was doing things that a girlfriend does, wasn't I?"

"…N-now that you mention it…"

"So maybe, rather than trying to act like a couple, we should just act like normal…touching each other, and spending time together, and stuff. Besides, isn't it better if, instead of forcing ourselves to conform and overthink everything, we just do it our own way…I mean, date the way we want to…?"

Amane felt a weight had lifted at the words *our own way*.

...Maybe we don't have to worry about how other people do things?

Amane had been anxious to act the part of a boyfriend, but there was really no need to worry about that. Mahiru liked Amane, and Amane liked Mahiru, so they were together. As long as those things were true, everything was fine. They could take their time and didn't have to rush or push themselves.

"You're right. I'm sorry, I just… You know I always overthink things. This is my first time, so I really don't know what I'm doing."

"…Right."

"So what, then? …We'll act like we always have, but…from now on, like, with love?"

With his mind made up, Amane took Mahiru's hand in his. Her cheeks, which were already quite red, flushed even more. She cast her eyes down as if she was embarrassed but squeezed his hand back and leaned against his arm.

"Amane-kun?"

"Yeah?"

"…I'm happy, just like this."

"Me too."

Amane agreed with her quietly whispered words, and he silently enjoyed the feeling of warmth against his side.

Chapter 2

Going to School Together and Making a Debut

"Amane-kun, wake up please."

There was a gentle voice calling his name.

In the midst of a comfortable slumber, he answered the soft whispering voice with a short "Mm," raised his heavy eyelids, and slowly opened his eyes.

The blurry figure of a lovely girl appeared before him, faintly illuminated by the sunlight streaming in through the window.

She seemed to have put one knee up on the bed to shake him awake and was leaning forward, her hemp-colored hair cascading around her like wisteria vines that swayed with her every movement.

"…Mahiru?"

"Yes. Good morning."

When he called out her name to confirm it was her, she nodded and answered in a familiar voice.

Amane didn't think he'd overslept, so he was having a little trouble figuring out why Mahiru was in his bedroom. She was there as if it was the most natural thing in the world, further deepening his confusion.

"…Morning. Why are you here?"

"Don't you remember what we talked about yesterday?" Mahiru frowned slightly.

"Yesterday?" he replied, then recalled their exchange from the previous evening.

"Beginning this Monday, could we start walking to school together?"

Mahiru had brought up the question as they were parting on Sunday night.

She'd looked up at him uneasily, fidgeting as if she couldn't settle down, which made him a little nervous, too.

Mahiru had probably spoken cautiously in order to see whether Amane was planning to conceal their relationship. They had already talked it over and decided to go public, but she still seemed worried about it.

As far as Amane was concerned, they had basically confessed their love to the world already, so he hadn't even considered keeping it a secret. Rather, he fully intended to tell people they were dating now.

"Yeah, sure."

"R-really?"

"What would I get out of lying?"

When she had heard Amane's answer, the tinge of anxiety in Mahiru's eyes disappeared, replaced by shades of delight.

Amane's heart fluttered when he'd heard her whisper bashfully, "I've always wanted to walk to school together," but she hadn't seemed to notice his agitation.

"All right, then, I'll come over to your place in the morning," she'd said brightly. "While we're at it, we may as well eat breakfast together."

"Oh, sweet. I get to eat Mahiru's cooking first thing in the morning."

"It's just going to be leftovers… Is it all right if I make you a lunch box, too?"

"I would like nothing better."

Amane would have been perfectly content with the breakfasts that Mahiru made, so he couldn't help but feel delighted for a chance to eat her cooking at lunch, too.

The thought that she wouldn't have to restrain herself in front of other people anymore had Mahiru beaming with happiness, and Amane was glad to see that whenever she'd looked at him. At the same time, it made him feel a bit embarrassed.

We'll start going together tomorrow, huh?

Up to that point, he had been staggering his commutes in order to avoid giving anyone clues about his relationship with Mahiru.

But going forward, that would no longer be necessary.

Being open about their relationship at school was sure to make others jealous of him, which was worrying, but the most important thing was that it would make Mahiru happy. Being by her side was enough for him.

Amane gazed at Mahiru, who was smiling happily, and mumbled quietly, "I guess I've got my work cut out for me."

"…Ah—"

As his brain fog started to clear, Amane groaned a little when he remembered their conversation from the previous night.

He wasn't opposed to the idea, but seeing Mahiru first thing in the morning surprised him and made him forget.

Mahiru watched Amane's reaction with an exasperated look.

But she didn't seem that irritated, rather she looked amused to be chiding Amane for his hopelessness, so Amane pouted his lips in apology.

"Good grief, you're so forgetful… Well, go on—get dressed and wash your face."

"Okay."

Mahiru was probably going to prepare their meals while he did that.

Suppressing a yawn, Amane got up out of bed and took off the shirt he was wearing. He heard a sudden shriek from right beside him. "Hyah!"

He tossed his shirt on the bed, then looked at Mahiru, who had her eyes firmly closed and was trembling. Her cheeks were red.

"L-listen, I told you this before, but please don't change in front of me," she said, clearly agitated from seeing him take off his shirt.

Amane couldn't help but smile wryly.

"I'm a guy, so I don't really mind if you see me."

"Well, I do…"

"Look, I'm not trying to show off or anything, and I'm not going to tell you that you have to get used to it or whatever, but we won't be able to go to a lot of summer staples like the pool if you let this bother you."

Amane wondered how Mahiru had gotten by up until now, since she was apparently not accustomed to seeing boys' bodies… But since she didn't know how to swim, she had probably always come up with some reason or another to sit out of swim classes at school.

Amane couldn't imagine Mahiru, who was so serious by nature, skipping a class, but since she really didn't know how to swim, and had purposely chosen a high school where swimming wasn't a required subject, she must have managed somehow.

They had talked about possibly visiting the pool over the summer, which would be difficult if she was overly conscious. Actually, at the pool, all the boys would be half naked. Amane was starting to worry if she would be able to take it.

"Uh… I—I can handle it…," Mahiru responded, almost groaning, in a feeble voice. She must have also been self-conscious about her reaction. Then she timidly opened her eyes and looked at Amane's body.

Almost on the verge of tears and shaking, with a bright-red face, Mahiru groaned after peering at his upper half.

Frankly, Amane didn't think he made for a particularly salacious tableau. He'd been exercising more and adding to his training regimen in an effort to become a better

match for Mahiru. Compared to when they'd first met, his figure was much more robust. Faint bulges of muscle were just starting to show on his body. But it wasn't something so impressive as to force Mahiru to avert her eyes.

...If she can't get used to this, it's going to mean trouble when we go all the way.

Amane figured that was probably a long way off, but it would still pose some difficulty if their relationship was going to develop past a certain point.

But Amane was positive that he would also freeze in his tracks if he ever saw Mahiru similarly exposed, so it was probably going to be an issue for both of them.

Amane's own face was now red, as he imagined impossible scenarios, so he spoke to Mahiru, whose face was just as flushed. "…Uh, so, um… Would you please go make food?"

"Yeah, I think I'll do that," she replied, scampering out of the room as fast as she could.

After Mahiru was gone, Amane banged his head on the nearest wall and let out a small groan. "What was she thinking, so early in the morning?"

Amane stared into the mirror. The person staring back seemed unfamiliar somehow.

Even though he was dressed in his school uniform as usual, Amane looked like a different person from the neck up. Or rather, he looked like a version of himself that he only ever showed Mahiru—a version that seemed out of place in his uniform.

Sweeping back his black bangs, Amane teased and adjusted his hair with his fingertips. He knew he had it easy compared to girls his age, since he didn't have to apply makeup or anything, but even so, he wasn't used to carefully arranging his hair like this.

"…Amane-kun?"

A voice called out to him from behind.

Reflected in the mirror was Mahiru, who had finished getting ready to leave for school and had come to summon Amane from the sink.

When he turned around and looked straight at her, he saw that she had a slightly clouded expression.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"…Don't you hate that?"

"Hate what?"

"…That hairstyle?"

"Oh, that."

She broached the topic with some hesitation, and her words made Amane worry.

Mahiru seemed anxious about Amane admitting to being her "mystery man." He'd always rejected the idea of styling his hair this way before going to school.

As far as Amane was concerned, however, he'd taken the time to dress himself up because he'd wanted to. It would have been a lie to say he didn't feel at least a little nervous, but since he had resolved to stand confidently by Mahiru's side, he wanted to go with a look that wouldn't make her embarrassed to be seen with him.

He wasn't necessarily going to stand out as some hunk, but this look had gotten the seal of approval from Itsuki and Yuuta. For now, Amane was just hoping nobody would question Mahiru's tastes in men.

"Not really; I don't hate it. Do you?" he asked.

"…I don't hate it, but…I'm just feeling a bit conflicted."

"Conflicted?"

"…I might have a hard time keeping you all to myself."

Mahiru looked undeniably sweet as she bashfully mumbled those charming words. Amane gave a little smile and gently stroked her head, being careful not to muss her hair.

"Well, why not enjoy having me to yourself while you still can?"

"…I think I will."

Honestly, he had meant it as a joke, but Mahiru nodded obediently and pressed herself against Amane's chest.

He had never expected her to agree, and he cringed a little when he realized he had said something that sounded presumptuous, but his lips curled naturally into a smile as he felt her forehead against his body.

There was nothing strange about his hand moving on its own to stroke her hair, in response to her overwhelming cuteness.

Mahiru was about one head shorter than him and had her face buried in his chest, clutching the fabric of his shirt so he couldn't pull away.

But when she glanced up at him, she looked somehow lonely.

"…You're really cool, so I feel like lots of other girls are going to talk to you. I'm happy they'll see you for what you really are, but…"

"Leaving aside whether I'm actually cool or not, do you think I have eyes for anyone other than you?"

"No, I don't, but it's an emotional issue."

"Jealousy?"

When Amane asked this without thinking, Mahiru's cheeks instantly flushed, but she affirmed his guess with a meek yes before rubbing her forehead into his chest again.

She must have been really embarrassed. Even her ears, peeking out from her flaxen hair, were a deep red.

"It's all right. Even if another girl does talk to me, I'm not interested in anyone but you, Mahiru."

He knew that probably wasn't enough to quell her anxiety, but Amane really didn't think about other girls in a romantic way. His attention would not be diverted so long as he had this beloved girlfriend who was burning with adorable jealousy.

Amane was naturally apathetic toward unfamiliar people anyway, so he was confident he wouldn't even take notice of any other girls. And the type of girl who would suddenly show interest in him because of his new appearance was the kind he didn't want to get to know in the first place.

"…I know that. That's why I'm reminding you of my feelings, so there's no opening for someone to take advantage of."

"Just don't get carried away… I don't want to let other people see too many of your cute faces."

"…You're so quick to say things like that!"

Flustered by Mahiru's sudden burst of inexplicable anger, Amane tried to soothe her by stroking her hair, but she beat playfully at his chest.

"When you say things like that so casually, I just can't take it," she exclaimed.

"What does that mean?"

"It's bad for my heart."

"Hey, that's my line… And anyway, you're one to talk. Sometimes I feel like I might die, because you fawn all over me so naturally."

It was actually Mahiru who, along with her propensity for touching him, had the highest destructive power.

The feeling of her soft body, the way her scent hung in the air, and how she always gently smiled at him meant that Amane's heart was always beating fast, like he was constantly sprinting.

He could feel his heart thumping loudly from Mahiru's loveliness. She must have noticed it, too, with her face buried in his chest.

"…I always suspected that a surprise attack would be more effective," Mahiru mumbled quietly as she pressed her cheek tightly against his chest. "…But your heart is really pounding hard, so as of today, I'm convinced of it," she whispered, seeming very satisfied to know she had made his heart race, and brushed her cheek against him.

The action was so sweet that Amane nearly groaned again. He told himself to get a grip and stroked Mahiru's hair as a way of redirecting the urges that arose inside of him.

After about five minutes, Mahiru seemed to be energized. Seeing her flushed cheeks and watery eyes made Amane's heart ache, but Mahiru appeared content, so he sequestered his impatient feelings down deep in his chest.

"Well, should we get going?"

Despite the morning distractions, they would be on time for school, as they had given themselves plenty of time to prepare. Even so, Amane wanted to leave soon, and when he said so, Mahiru put on a smile and answered, "Yes." Her skin was glowing.

It's only morning, and I'm already exhausted…

Amane didn't dislike the show of affection—actually, it was just the opposite; he was so pleased by it that he was wearing himself out by exercising all his self-restraint. If it had been the weekend, he would have indulged Mahiru further, but they had school, so he was unable to do as he wished.

Mahiru didn't appear to have noticed Amane's exhaustion. She seemed to be bursting with energy.

Even though he was a little tired from the morning's various tribulations, it wasn't a bad sort of tiredness. Amane smiled wryly, picked up his school bag, and he and Mahiru stepped out the door together.

Feeling some strangely deep emotions about leaving the house in school uniforms together for the first time, Amane locked the door and looked over at Mahiru. She was fidgeting nervously.

Her hand was still gripping the hem of his shirt.

"…Want to hold hands?"

"Yeah."

He had apparently guessed correctly. Looking at the bashful Mahiru, he grumbled quietly, "You're so cute, damn," then casually took her backpack and slung it over his own shoulder. With the opposite hand, he intertwined his own fingers with Mahiru's.

She immediately looked up at him with eyes that said she hadn't meant to make him carry her bag, but he whispered, "I'm your boyfriend now, so you should let me do things like this for you."

Mahiru pressed her lips tightly together in an adorable expression of acceptance.

"You know, it feels kind of embarrassing to hold hands like this again," Amane said.

They were leaving the apartment building and walking their normal route to school, but they hadn't held hands like this since their Golden Week outing, so there was a slight awkwardness to it.

Rather than simply being her escort, Amane entwined his fingers with Mahiru's, holding her hand in a gesture of loving intimacy. They had held hands many times before, but never like this, so he was naturally quite nervous.

He was worried about whether he was squeezing her hand too tightly, or if his sweaty palms were making her uncomfortable, but when he glanced over at Mahiru, she was smiling cheerfully.

“It feels a little embarrassing, but I’m happy,” she said.

“…Yeah.”

“I’ve been wanting to go to school like this for a long time. And finally being able to do that… I’m just…so happy.”

Walking to school side by side was such a trivial thing. But apparently it was something Mahiru had been eagerly anticipating, and her expression looked brighter than usual.

“And does that have much to do with me?”

Mahiru relaxed into a smile and mumbled timidly, “S-sure it does… Because being with you is the reason why I’m happy.”

“…I see.”

Amane felt his chest growing gradually hot as he realized just how much she liked him.

He had been trying his best not to let his timidness show on his face, but Mahiru seemed to notice, and her happy smile broadened.

“So from now on, I’m going to be happy every day… I’m a lucky girl.”

“I feel like I should be the one saying that sort of thing.”

“Well then, we’re both happy, and that’s cause for celebration, don’t you agree? We can finally enjoy it.” Mahiru giggled and leaned in close.

Taking care not to disturb Mahiru, Amane subtly shifted so that there was still some room between them. With his free hand, he gave her a pat on the head.

Although he had gotten used to walking while holding hands, Amane was still uncomfortable getting too close in public. Of course, he was glad to be near his girlfriend, but he was worried about how it must look to other people if the two of them were too affectionate so early in the morning.

Trying not to let his uncertainty show on his face, Amane squeezed Mahiru’s dainty hand tightly, and they walked to school with their arms pressed against each other.

It was the time of day where people would be commuting to work or school, so there were a lot of students and people in suits around. Amane was bothered by the thought that they were all looking at them.

The closer they got to school, the more he felt like people were staring.

“I can feel their eyes on us,” Amane grumbled exhaustedly in spite of himself.

They received a lot of different looks. Some people must have been wondering who the boy walking hand in hand with Mahiru was. Others were looking at the couple with jealousy or envy in their eyes.

And while Amane had expected as much, actually experiencing it was more uncomfortable than he had imagined. At least not everybody who looked their way

seemed to disapprove, but as someone who had been perfectly happy living a quiet, inconspicuous life, he was certainly feeling unsettled.

"There's no helping it," Mahiru said. "At a glance, you look like a changed man."

He and Mahiru, pressed close, were walking alongside each other holding hands. Of course, calling attention to the fact that they really were a couple was going to earn them some stares from the other students on their way to school. But it was obvious that something had changed with Amane since Sports Day, and although no one was asking who he was out loud, they were watching with curious eyes.

"Do I really look that different?"

"Yes. How can I put it? You changed your hair, obviously, but you're also standing up nice and straight, and you have a confident expression, so the impression you make is completely different."

"Sorry, I've always been a loser."

"Please don't put yourself down… You've always been different. I like both versions of you, but I hate the Amane-kun who belittles himself."

"I'll be careful from now on; I don't like hearing that you hate me."

"Very good."

Mahiru gave Amane a satisfied smile, and even more stares came their way.

This time, some of them gave more menacing looks, which made Amane's cheek twitch slightly, but they disappeared as soon as Mahiru flashed a first-rate angelic smile at the onlookers.

In some senses, the angel, unfazed by the attention of the crowds, was the stronger of the two of them.

Amane adjusted his grip on Mahiru's hand and looked straight ahead. He could still feel the prickle of staring eyes. They would arrive at school very soon, which meant even more people would be looking. Amane's shoulders began to ache a little.

"If this is how people are staring now, it's gonna be really annoying once we're in the classroom."

"Better come to terms with it… Or are you saying you hate it?"

"I don't hate it. After all, I decided to change."

When Mahiru had confessed her feelings, Amane had known he was going to have to change his life for the better. He'd already made up his mind to improve himself so he could be the kind of guy who was good enough to be Mahiru's boyfriend—and a version of himself that he wouldn't be ashamed of.

Amane readied himself, feeling a slight stomachache coming on. He couldn't let himself slack off; he had to become someone worthy of her.

"…Is that so?" Mahiru murmured, squeezing his fingers tightly.

“Huh? Mahirun?”

Amane noticed Mahiru’s ears had gone slightly red, and he was about to point that out when a familiar, cutesy voice called out from behind. They turned around and saw Chitose, blinking dramatically in surprise.

Wearing an expression that could best be described as dazed, Chitose looked Mahiru over, then shifted her gaze to examine Amane.

Chitose noticed their interlocked hands and smiled in satisfaction, “Aha!” She trotted up to them and slapped Amane on the back enthusiastically. “Good morning! So you finally decided to make an appearance, mystery man?”

“Shut up.”

“Morning, Mahirun! I see everything went well!”

Chitose looked like she was in a great mood as she slapped him again, fairly hard, with a wide smile.

So far they had only gotten looks of curiosity and jealousy, so Amane’s chest warmed just a little at this expression of pure goodwill.

“Congratulations, Mahirun! I guess there was some use in me always looking out for you!”

“I used your advice for all sorts of things.”

“Sure did! Like what to do when Amane was being so obtuse, and so on.”

“…Mahiru?”

“W-well, you were really slow to realize…”

He wasn’t able to make much of a counterargument.

It was his own fault for stubbornly failing to pick up on the signals she had been sending out the whole time, so it was no wonder she had consulted with Chitose.

“Well, it is Amane we’re talking about, after all,” Chitose said as she looked him over again. He wasn’t too happy about that appraisal. Chitose examined him closely, probably because it was the first time she had ever seen him style his hair properly.

“Wow, even so, I think this is the first time I’ve ever seen Amane all dressed up like Mahirun’s mystery man!”

“…What did you call me?”

“That’s what Ikkun and Yuu-chan called it. Mm-hmm, you know, you’re not at Ikkun’s level, but you still look pretty good!”

Chitose smiled again and whacked him on the back. It was her way of showing that she cared. Amane took this as encouragement—and reassurance that he was the same as always even if his outward appearance had changed—and his lips curled slightly upward.

“So as far as you’re concerned, Itsuki’s number one, right?”

“Of course he is! And you’re Mahirun’s number one, so no complaints, right?”

“All right, as long as I’m in that position, I’m happy.”

Amane had no interest in becoming Chitose’s number one. He was perfectly satisfied so long as Mahiru said he was the most important person to her.

He glanced over at Mahiru, who was still holding his hand. She put her face close to his arm and whispered quietly, “…Amane-kun is my number one.” Maybe she was slightly embarrassed to announce it in front of Chitose—her cheeks flushed a bit.

“The blushing maiden! You’re so cute, Mahirun. If Amane wasn’t here, I’d give you a big hug and shower you with love.”

“Yeah, yeah. That’s not something to do on the way to school; you can hug her all you want once we get to the classroom.”

“Huh? Yay! Mahirun, I got permission from your boyfriend! I’m gonna squeeze you tight later!”

“Ah, o-okay, sure, just—be gentle…?”

Mahiru nodded with bewilderment once it was somehow decided that she was going to get hugged, and Chitose started walking along beside her, grinning from ear to ear. She was probably eager to congratulate Mahiru.

Satisfied that the two of them were getting along harmoniously, Amane turned away and started to look around.

There were more eyes on them than ever before.

...Bet we’re going to be hit with a barrage of questions when we get to the classroom.

Amane smiled bitterly but made sure the two girls wouldn’t see it, as he imagined what would be coming soon in several minutes under a deluge of stares.

Once they made it to the school building, they were met with even more looks, and even though Chitose was by their side, the sight of Amane and Mahiru holding hands and walking down the hall naturally attracted a lot of attention.

Chitose reacted nonchalantly, “Whoa, you’re really the center of attention.”

But Amane wasn’t accustomed to all the staring.

Mahiru strolled along confidently, accustomed to drawing people’s gazes. Their tightly clasped hands were in full view—and the walk to the classroom was something like a public debut.

As they proceeded down the hallway, Amane could hear voices.

“The angel is with a guy…”

“Shiina-san looks different than usual…”

“Was there always a guy like that here?! That’s a different guy from the one at Sports Day, isn’t it…?”

Of course, Amane was actually the same boy who Mahiru had pointed out as her important person on Sports Day.

Mahiru didn’t respond to any of their comments, but she did show her sweet, angelic smile to everyone around them.

“Amane-kun?”

“Hmm?”

“We’ll arrive soon. Are you doing all right?”

Mahiru posed the question as they approached their classroom.

“We’re already showing off that we’re dating, and I’ve prepared myself. I’ll be fine.”

“…Is that so?”

“Everyone’s gonna be so surprised!” Chitose interrupted. “Imagine, Amane showing up all handsome the Monday after Mahirun made that huge declaration. I was surprised, too!” Chitose gave an easygoing smile.

Amane realized that he probably should have contacted her and told her, as well as Itsuki and Yuuta, and felt slightly regretful.

He had put it off because he’d felt awkward about announcing that he and Mahiru had started dating, but looking back, he was sure he ought to have informed the friends who had been looking out for them first.

“…Chitose?”

“Hmm?”

“Sorry, um, for not letting you know.”

“Nah, you got together after Sports Day was over, right? I figured the two of you were busy making out, plus you’re the type who would rather tell us face-to-face and not over text messages, so don’t worry about it!”

Amane had mixed feelings about Chitose’s certainty that they had been “busy making out,” but it was true that the two of them had spent the previous day snuggled up together, thinking of nothing else.

Besides, as Chitose had said, Amane had wanted to personally share the news with his friends who had looked out for them in various ways rather than over the phone. And Chitose had figured it out before he’d said anything and ran up to tease them, so it was less of an announcement and more like she was just confirming it was real.

“…Thank you.”

“My pleasure! Heh-heh, you should have a little more respect for me; it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that I was a central figure in hooking you two up!”

“Ha-ha. Allow me to repay the great Chitose with a crepe from that place you like in front of the station sometime.”

“I accept your offer!”

As Amane engaged in some banter with Chitose, he and Mahiru arrived at the door to their classroom.

“Ah, good morning, Shii…na-san?”

The first to notice them were some girls who were hanging out nearby.

They were sitting on their desks, talking excitedly about something, but they looked up when they realized Mahiru had entered the room…then noticed Amane holding her hand.

Their eyes traveled from the clasped hands to Amane’s face.

The looks on the girls’ faces showed that they were wondering who he was.

That wasn’t surprising, Amane had never dressed up in front of his classmates before. Some of the girls in class had probably seen him around town, but the Amane Fujimiya they knew from school had never looked like that, so in their eyes, he must have seemed like a stranger.

However, the incident at Sports Day the week before, where Mahiru made it public that Amane was her “important person,” was still fresh in everybody’s minds. And Amane had also admitted to being the guy they’d seen with Mahiru during Golden Week.

If they put a little thought into it, they should have been able to make the connection that the young man currently holding hands with Mahiru was indeed Amane.

Before they had completed the mental calculus needed to reach that conclusion, Amane let go of Mahiru’s hand and put his bag down on his desk.

He did it to show everyone very clearly who he was.

Once they realized, the classroom became quieter than usual. Even the classmates who were usually bursting with conversation had their eyes trained on Amane.

"Good morning, Fujimiya."

Just as the silence was starting to feel awkward, Yuuta and Itsuki approached Amane, wearing their usual smiles.

He was suddenly extremely grateful for his two friends, who not only recognized him but greeted him like they always did.

"Mornin', guys."

"What's going on, Fujimiya? Did you finally accept your fate?"

"Come on, Yuuta, that's no way to put it… It's more like, he caught her, but he got caught as well."

Amane had consulted with the two of them many times. And Itsuki had been the first one to recognize that he had feelings for Mahiru. The two boys had been able to tell what was going on the instant Amane and Mahiru had walked into the classroom holding hands, especially with Amane having styled his hair in what they had named his "mystery man" look.

"Congratulations, Fujimiya. We've only become friends recently, so I can't say it's actually been that long, but I was starting to get impatient. I'm excited that it's finally happening."

"You don't know the half of it, Yuuta! I've been looking out for him for like half a year. There's a limit to how much a guy can take, waitin' on this coward!"

"Oh, well, I'm sooo sorry to make you two wait," Amane answered sarcastically.

Itsuki nodded seriously and mumbled, "It took you long enough." It seemed like his friend might have actually gotten rather emotional after watching Amane and Mahiru dance around each other for the past six months.

For better or worse, Itsuki had helped Amane and pushed him along—more accurately, kicked him forward—so Amane was grateful. Itsuki had been a little too meddlesome sometimes, but even so, he had always been there to encourage Amane whenever he was at a standstill. Among all their friends, Itsuki was probably the one who was most invested in their new relationship.

"So you made up your mind to go with that look, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Man, it seems weird; I'm not used to seeing you done up like that."

"You're right. I only got to see it the other day."

Yuuta had seen Amane dressed up for Golden Week almost a month ago. But that had been the only time, so Amane wasn't surprised that his friends weren't used to it yet. The only one who was used to it was Mahiru.

Speaking of Mahiru, Chitose was hanging all over her, rubbing her head teasingly as their other classmates shuffled over to swarm around them. Amane was some distance away, but the classroom was so quiet that he could hear what they were asking her. Even if he hadn't, though, he could have guessed what they were discussing.

"Hey, Fujimiya-kun!"

As Amane was staring sympathetically in Mahiru's direction, someone else called his name.

When he turned toward the voice, several girls had surrounded him. They were looking him over, not even attempting to hide the immense curiosity in their eyes.

Amane wasn't very good at dealing with the opposite sex, so situations like this had always been bad for his stomach. However, he had been steeling himself for something like this to happen, so he answered without letting his inner thoughts show.

"…What is it?"

"Wow, it really is Fujimiya-kun! You look a bit different, so we were surprised!"

"Yeah, this is a totally new look!"

"It really is! Before, you were pretty plain!"

"Whoa, it's rude to call him plain."

"Ah, sorry, Fujimiya-kun."

"It's fine; you're not wrong," Amane said with a wry smile. He was almost overwhelmed by the energy of the girls but tried his best not to get swept away.

What they were saying was the truth, so he didn't argue back or get angry about it. He was the one who chose to be plain, and personality-wise, he had never wanted to stand out, so in class, he had remained the quiet person who was always just kind of there.

Anyone in this class would have viewed him as reserved and unremarkable.

That had suddenly changed, so it was understandable there was some confusion.

"You really committed to a new style, huh?" one of the girls asked.

"Guess so," he answered. "Is it weird?"

"Not at all! I think you look much better."

"Actually, you're hot now; I was surprised!"

"Well, if you think so, then it must have been worth the effort."

All their compliments made Amane feel pretty embarrassed, but it wouldn't do him any good to disagree—he had learned that being too humble could become a toxic habit over time, so he gratefully accepted the compliments.

He nodded, trying his best to maintain a gentle expression, and the girls laughed like they were enjoying themselves.

"Hey, hey, can I ask you one thing?"

"As long as it's something I can answer, go ahead," he replied.

Finally, here it comes.

It was a question someone was bound to ask sooner or later, so he planned to answer now, to make the situation clear.

The rest of their classmates seemed to be straining their ears to hear, so if he made the announcement here, it was sure to circulate throughout the school.

"Are you and Shiina-san dating? I heard you came to school holding hands today…"

"Yes, we started dating last week. Thanks for asking."

When he clearly affirmed their suspicions, a chorus of shrill shrieks filled the room. He thought he could also hear the boys behind him making noises of despair and resentment, but he ignored them.

At any rate, he was sure the boys would have their own questions later, so Amane decided he would deal with them then.

"Wha—? How did you get with Shiina-san…?"

"We've shared a connection since last year. We just naturally became close. Right, Mahiru?"

"Yes."

Mahiru approached with a smile. That didn't mean that the barrage of questions was over, but maybe she had concluded that it would speed things along if the girls saw her conversing with Amane.

She moved over next to him and stood close enough that it was hard to tell if they were touching, then flashed a lovely smile at the girls who had been interrogating him.

"It's difficult to explain, but all sorts of things happened between us, and we became a couple. My feelings had been unrequited for a long time, so I'm very, very happy… So I was sort of bragging. That's why we came in holding hands."

Just like when they were walking to school, Mahiru placed her hand on Amane's, and he smiled slightly and squeezed her hand.

"Actually, I think I was the one who fell for you first," Amane said.

"Oh, I'm sure I was first," Mahiru teased. "Well, in either case, you took forever to confess."

"I do regret that; I feel sorry about it. But I've made my intentions clear, so please forgive me."

"…I believe I was the one who took the first step, though."

"Next time, I'll be sure to do it right."

"Do what, exactly?"

"…I…uh…guess we'll see."

If Mahiru was thinking about what the next step in their relationship might be, she didn't show it… She just acted like it was a mystery.

Amane had something in mind, but it wasn't the kind of thing he was going to say out loud. He didn't even feel like he was old enough for something so serious just yet, so he tucked the thought away in a far corner of his mind. Amane was certain his feelings for Mahiru would never fade or change, no matter how many years went by. He intended to be the one to ask her, when the time was right, so he decided that the whole matter could wait.

Mahiru gave Amane a dissatisfied look when he dodged her question, but he stroked her hair, and she seemed to be mollified.

"…You're avoiding the issue again."

"I'll say it someday; be patient."

"Always making me wait."

She sounded disappointed, but her expression was one of pure delight.

But then she seemed to realize something, and she quickly covered her face with her hands as she flushed bright red. Amane wondered what had caused her to do that, but when he looked around the room, he saw their classmates staring, speechless.

They were all staring at Amane and Mahiru.

—*Oops.*

Sure, he had been meaning to show off his relationship with Mahiru and cement his standing as her boyfriend, but he hadn't meant for them to have the kind of conversation they usually had at home in front of everybody.

Out of habit, he patted her head without thinking, and it was easy to see what their classmates thought of him touching her like that.

"…Watch out, Amane—you're flirting, and you don't even realize it."

Even Itsuki was telling him to dial it back—and he was one half of the original "idiot couple."

Flustered, Amane removed his hand from Mahiru's head and bit down on his lip in an attempt to keep his cheeks from heating up.

In the blink of an eye, news that Amane and Mahiru had started dating spread throughout the school. For better or worse, thanks to some gossipy classmates and their display of affection on the way to school, the rumors were confirmed.

Whenever Amane walked down the hall, he would hear people whispering, so he felt extremely uncomfortable.

"Well, I'm sure it'll die down in a few days," Makoto said, gazing at the uproar, one step back from the crowd.

“I’m sure it will.” Kazuya nodded. “Ultimately, people get bored of talking about the same thing over and over. And something else will come along, and everyone will forget all about it.”

“I sure hope you’re right,” Amane groaned. “It’s gonna be awful if every day is like this.”

Even during break times, people were whispering things at a distance, and it really bothered him.

“Well, I’m sure the questions will stop eventually, but you might find yourself getting swarmed for another reason soon enough,” Makoto said.

“Another reason?” Amane asked.

“I think you might be considered a hot commodity now.”

“But I’m already taken.”

He was already thinking about his future with Mahiru, so even if another girl tried to catch his eye, he was sure nothing would happen. Nobody could compete with Mahiru for his attention. He couldn’t imagine choosing anyone over her.

What Amane didn’t want was for people to think he might be insincere. The thought really bothered him.

“Well, there are times when love isn’t logical.”

“Hmm, it’s rare to hear you say something like that, Makoto,” Kazuya remarked.

“How rude. You know, I bet it’s impossible to ignore your feelings, if you really, really like someone, even if you know they’re already taken. Love is like a reflex, or something. Of course, sometimes you can’t act on that impulsiveness, though,” Makoto continued as he looked over at a group of girls who were huddled together chatting, then sighed. “Well, I don’t think the two of you have anything to worry about,” he added.

“I agree,” said Kazuya. “Flaunting it in front of everybody the way that you two did will probably discourage anyone else from trying. But you know, Fujimiya, I never would have thought you’d act like that in public.”

“Please forget about that…!”

Amane was struck with embarrassment thinking about his exchange with Mahiru that morning. They had been trying to make it clear that they were together, but Amane had certainly not meant to pat Mahiru’s head or come as close as he had to letting on that he was already thinking about marriage.

Mahiru had done her best to deflect the attention, but Itsuki and Makoto had apparently noticed anyway. They’d made some astonished remarks about how in love the couple must be.

“Well, Fujimiya, now everyone knows you’re the only one who gets to see that side of Shiina. That counts as a win, at least?”

"…You're probably right, but even so, it's still pretty embarrassing."

"Says the guy who came to school holding her hand."

"That's different," Amane insisted. That kind of thing was a lot more mortifying when it was unintentional.

"Aw, you shouldn't feel down. Actually, I bet there are some people who are grateful you made such a scene."

"Grateful?"

"Sure, the rest of the girls will be happy that all the boys who had their eyes on Shiina-san will finally start looking elsewhere."

The thought had actually crossed Amane's mind already.

Not every girl in their class looked up to Mahiru. Amane knew some of them had complicated feelings toward her, at least in part because she monopolized the attention of the boys in their class. Mahiru had always been single, unattainable, and had shown no one any affection, but now that she told everyone she had a special relationship with Amane and made it clear that she didn't have eyes for anyone else, some of the animosity the girls held toward her seemed to have subsided.

"It must be hard for girls to deal with all that stuff," Amane remarked. "Well, now that that's settled, I hope Mahiru can be just one of the girls. She felt so embarrassed being called an angel; she honestly hated it."

"She really did hate that, huh?"

"Yeah, no surprise there. Even Yuuta makes a face when you call him a prince."

In his heart, Amane said a little prayer for Yuuta, who probably had the same problems as Mahiru.

"…What are you guys talking about?" Mahiru was headed their way. She must have finished her conversation with Chitose.

Although it seemed like she hadn't heard what the boys had been discussing, Mahiru saw that Amane was blushing and realized someone must have reminded him of their interaction that morning. She gave the three of them, Amane included, a suspicious look.

"Oh, Shiina-san? We weren't discussing anything particularly important. We were talking about how you're just one of the girls now."

"And how on earth did you arrive at that topic…?" Mahiru asked.

"Ah, well, um…," Amane stammered, "…we were just talking about how everyone seems to have finally realized that you're not some angel; you're just an ordinary girl."

Amane and the other boys explained their conversation to Mahiru, putting aside what had happened that morning.

Mahiru nodded. “I see. You know, I was always aware that some people…idolized me. So I’m sure what you said is probably true,” she said, keeping her voice down.

Makoto and Kazuya both made faces that said they understood perfectly.

They had been friends with Yuuta for a long time, so they most likely had seen all sorts of things along the way. They probably had been concerned about Mahiru as well, who had been going through almost the same sort of problems.

“But I’m not really worried about what other people say about me anymore,” Mahiru added.

“Oh, really?”

“Nope… As long as I’m the only girl for Amane-kun, nothing else matters,” she replied quietly.

Only Amane, Makoto, and Kazuya were close enough to hear her.

But her words had been imbued with a great deal of destructive power.

Amane wasn’t the only one who was enchanted by Mahiru’s wide and bashful smile, with her slightly flushed cheeks.

Makoto and Kazuya made noises of surprise, and the other students who had been glancing at them occasionally also stared at Mahiru with their mouths hanging open.

“Fujimiya, do something about your girlfriend…,” his friends groaned.

Amane knew they were right, but even so, he couldn’t do anything about the collateral damage, and anyway, he was the one suffering the worst of it, so he was busy desperately trying to calm down his pounding heart.

“…You’re really in deep, huh?” Makoto murmured in exasperation.

Her cheeks still bright red, Mahiru smiled even wider and nodded.

Chapter 3

Interrogation Over Lunch

“Amane-kun, what do you want to do for lunch?”

When morning classes were over, Mahiru approached Amane’s seat carrying a bag with two lunch boxes in it.

He had been planning to eat lunch with the usual group but now found himself hesitating somewhat, worried it might cause them trouble.

Incidentally, Makoto and Kazuya had been eating with them lately, but the two of them had already firmly refused to join them that day, on the grounds that they didn’t want to put themselves in the line of fire. Sadly, it was undeniable that Amane and Mahiru had been making things even worse during the breaks between classes.

“Hmm, well, if Itsuki and the others don’t mind, I’d like to eat together, but—” Amane hesitated.

“Did you think we were actually going to abandon you?”

Itsuki, Chitose, and Yuuta joined Amane and Mahiru. They already had their wallets out.

Itsuki grinned bitterly. “Don’t be a stranger, man. We’ll eat together like we always do.”

“Itsuki…”

“After all, you two are liable to get into trouble without a chaperone, so you could almost say it’s my responsibility to be there.”

“…I’ve got mixed feelings about that,” Amane grumbled. But he understood what Itsuki was getting at as he remembered how careless he and Mahiru had been earlier in the day. It obviously wasn’t intentional, but he wouldn’t deny that either Mahiru or he could slip up again.

Itsuki’s concern wasn’t entirely misplaced. “Well, in any case, we’re doing the usual,” he said.

“I actually want to see Mahirun be more aggressive, so I don’t mind,” Chitose said. “As far as I’m concerned, you two can go for it.”

Yuuta chimed in. “I think it would be…awkward for the rest of us, if you were to make a big show of your intimacy…you know?”

“You too, Kadowaki…?”

“It would be embarrassing for those of us who’d have to watch,” Yuuta continued. “At the same time, you two seem happy, and that’s the most important thing,” he said with a smile.

Amane was left speechless by Yuuta’s heartfelt endorsement.

“Though some of us would appreciate it if you showed at least a little restraint,” Yuuta added.

Amane had gotten that sense after seeing Makoto’s and Kazuya’s reactions, so he nodded seriously.

“…So the cafeteria’s okay, yeah? I mean, I don’t have a lunch box, so I’m going there anyway.”

“Sounds good,” Amane agreed.

“All right, let’s get going. I wonder what the special is today?”

“I think it’s fried chicken.”

“Oh, sweet! The fried chicken they serve here is so light and crispy; it’s so good.”

Itsuki walked off, waving his wallet and grinning broadly. Amane felt grateful and followed him.

“…Here, Amane-kun, take your lunch box.”

Once the five of them had taken their seats in the cafeteria and gotten their food, Mahiru pulled a lunch box out of her bag and offered it to Amane.

His was one size larger than Mahiru’s, which she pulled out next, and his held quite a bit more food. It was enough to satisfy the appetite of a high school boy rather than a girl who usually didn’t eat very much.

“Mm, thanks.”

“Aw, Mahirun made you lunch, how nice!”

“I’m not giving you any.”

“Stingy!” Chitose puffed out her cheeks in feigned anger.

“Why don’t you swap a little with me?” Mahiru offered, and immediately, the balloon of Chitose’s cheeks deflated.

It was a childish performance, but it matched perfectly with Chitose’s carefree attitude, and Itsuki also smiled as he looked on.

Amane lifted the lid of his lunch box as he listened to the girls.

The inside was packed with the remainders of the previous day’s chicken-and-tomato stew, spinach and corn sauteed in butter and soy sauce, steamed broccoli and mini

tomatoes, wieners cut neatly into the shape of little octopuses, and Amane's favorite dish, rolled omelets.

Knowing Amane's appetite, Mahiru had been sure to include plenty of the main dish. He basically ate anything, and liked vegetables, too, but he had a bigger appetite when there was meat involved. On top of that, she had added rolled omelets, his favorite food, so Amane was excited.

"I put a lot of your favorite dish in yours, Amane-kun, is that all right?"

"That omelet is the only thing that's gonna get me through the afternoon."

“You’re exaggerating.”

“No, I mean it.”

Amane loved egg dishes and found an omelet even more satisfying than meat. So an extra-large portion of it was exactly what he wanted.

“Thanks for the meal,” Amane said, showing his appreciation for Mahiru and the food, and immediately extending his chopsticks toward the omelet.

When he put it in his mouth, it felt soft, and when he bit down, the harmony between the rich taste of the dashi and the slight sweetness of the sugar spread gently through his mouth, and his lips curled into a smile.

It was so delicious that it would have been a waste to swallow right away, so he chewed slowly and savored the taste.

People did say it was important to chew your food well, and he also really felt like he wanted to enjoy it as long as he could.

The egg was as delicious as always, and as Amane ate without attempting to hide the look of rapture on his face, Yuuta watched him and let out an astonished squawk.

“…You make it look really delicious, Fujimiya.”

“It really is.”

“I can tell. If you can make Fujimiya look that happy when he’s eating, you must be really blessed, Shiina-san.”

With a smile, Mahiru had been watching Amane. When Yuuta turned to her, her cheeks flushed slightly, and she smiled. “Yes, indeed, I’m very grateful that he always tells me how tasty my cooking is. It’s worth the effort—really it is.”

“I’m glad that you made it for me, and trust me, it’s delicious.”

“I’ve got a good grasp on your tastes now, Amane-kun, and I want to concentrate on cooking stuff you like.”

“You’re doing fine as it is, I’d say.”

“Since I’m going to the trouble, I want to match your tastes perfectly.”

“I like everything you make. As long as you cook it, anything is delicious.”

Amane hoped to be with Mahiru for a long time, so he didn’t want her to cook just to suit his preferences but also to make things she enjoyed eating.

Rather than matching every meal to his tastes, he wanted to compare and adjust dishes until they found something that was just right for the two of them together—and also try foods Mahiru liked as well.

As Amane tossed a wiener carved with a smiley face into his mouth, he nodded seriously; Mahiru made an anxious face and hunched over.

When he saw that her cheeks had taken on a slight tinge of red, he looked up at the other people around the table and saw Itsuki looking astonished.

"You're not even gonna give me a chance to keep you from flirting, eh?"

"…We're not flirting," Amane replied.

"Says you… *Tch.*"

"Wait, so you're saying that this is only the lead-in?" Chitose asked. "This doesn't even count as flirting yet?"

"You guys…," Amane groaned.

"Well, I guess compared to your exchange in the classroom earlier, this isn't as bad," Itsuki said. "I can't blame you for staking your claim, either. If nothing else, you definitely let everyone know that there isn't the tiniest gap where they can butt in between you two."

At those words, Amane shifted his gaze from his friends to the cafeteria seats surrounding them. He noticed that many of the boys, both their peers and some upperclassmen, were looking his way.

They were practically glaring at him with undisguised contempt, although whenever Mahiru glanced in their direction, they were quick to avert their eyes.

Amane wasn't sure whether he should be embarrassed that everyone had overheard their conversation or grateful that they had managed to rein it in.

Yuuta frowned. "And here I was certain that they were doing it on purpose…," he grumbled. "…But seriously, it's great that you're so close. Just remember that it's easy for others to peer into your little world, so maybe be a little more discreet," he cautioned. "Though it does seem to have been effective…" Yuuta sounded slightly exasperated as he added that last part.

Amane could only grimace in response.

"…Wh-what's with the crowd, guys?"

Upon returning to the classroom after lunch, Amane found himself swarmed by the other boys in his class.

Mahiru was not in her seat—she'd apparently gone to buy drinks with Chitose. Itsuki and Yuuta saw that Amane was being surrounded and told him to resign himself to an interrogation before promptly turning their attention to preparing for the next class.

Amane cursed them for being so insensitive, but he knew that if he was going to continue dating Mahiru, he'd have to learn to deal with this sort of thing himself. So he let out a quiet sigh and allowed the boys in his class to encircle him.

Surprisingly, they didn't seem to be mad at Amane in particular. It was more like they simply needed to vent their frustrations at him.

“Incredible, the theft of the century! You’ve stolen our angel!”

“…You’re overstating it, plus Mahiru never belonged to any of you in the first place.”

“I’m so jealous; you get to eat the angel’s handmade lunches!”

“…Well, we are dating, so you can’t really complain about that.”

“I can’t believe you got someone so out of your league, just like that.”

“…It wasn’t exactly easy, you know.”

Complaints were flying at him from every direction, but all of them were just sulky and benign. He could hear some small tinges of jealousy, but they weren’t shouting their objections to the relationship itself, so Itsuki, who kept sneaking glances over to watch, flashed an infuriating smile and looked away again. Clearly, he did not intend to offer any help for the time being.

“So how did you and Shiina-san get to know each other in the first place? You mentioned you’ve been hanging out since last year, but what did you guys even have in common?”

“Ah, well, how do I explain…? I just happened to lend her an umbrella when she was caught in the rain. A lot has happened since then, but that was the reason we started spending time together.”

“That’s all?!”

“Th-that’s all? I mean, well, after that we got to know each other, and Mahiru couldn’t stand that I was such a slob, so she started taking care of me.”

“You sure are a lucky guy!”

“Well, I won’t deny that.”

Quite the series of coincidences had brought them together.

If Mahiru hadn’t gotten a phone call from her mother that day, or if Amane hadn’t noticed his surroundings, or if he had taken a hot shower after lending her his umbrella like he should have, or if he’d displayed any kind of ulterior motives, Amane’s and Mahiru’s fates would never have become linked. If just one of those elements had turned out differently, their present relationship probably never would have come to be.

And so he had no doubt that the fact they formed a connection was nothing short of a small miracle.

Amane shrugged and chuckled while frowning anxiously, and the classmate in front of him sighed quietly.

“…I don’t mean to put you down, but I don’t understand why the angel fell for you, Fujimiya. If it was a matter of looks or brains, surely there would be other choices. Now we know how you met, but what caused her to start liking you?”

“I honestly have no idea why she likes me—or even when she started…”

Amane knew she cared about him, but he did not specifically understand when Mahiru had started having feelings for him. He didn't know how to respond to their questions as Mahiru was probably the only one who knew the answers.

Amane could only smile ambiguously, and a few of his classmates—the ones who had started speaking to him since he'd helped them during Mahiru's study session the week prior—laughed a little.

"Well, I wonder if it isn't this? Fujimiya is a calm guy, he really pays attention to the people around him, and he's always looking out for everyone. Maybe that's why?"

"Shiina-san doesn't seem like she would go for the boisterous type, so maybe you're right. She would probably prefer someone who makes her feel at ease when they spend time together over someone who's more energetic, right? And Fujimiya can be blunt, but he wouldn't make fun of his partner or do hurtful stuff on purpose. He's probably nice to be around."

"Actually, now that I think about it, Fujimiya has always been concerned about Shiina-san, hasn't he? That was true at the study session, and during cooking class, and at Sports Day, too. He's always been watching out for her, like a gentleman."

"That is a very Fujimiya-like way of taking care of Shiina-san."

Two of Amane's classmates talked about him like he wasn't even there.

Amane could feel himself getting flustered, and he glared at them. "Seriously… Imano, Yamazaki, gimme a break."

But his classmates showed no signs of flinching back from Amane's piercing gaze.

"He's probably trying to hide his embarrassment."

"So he's not being up-front with us, I see."

"You guys…"

Just as Amane was thinking that he might have preferred it if they had been making fun of him rather than singing his praises, he heard a familiar voice, laughing from outside the circle.

"Ah-ha-ha! Well, Amane's a hard nut to crack, but he is nice, and pretty gentle, which couldn't have hurt with Mahirun."

"That's right… What are you doing here, Shirakawa-san?!"

Chitose, who hadn't been in the classroom until now, had suddenly poked her head in.

"Huh? Lunch break is almost over, and I got a tip that while we were gone, you guys ganged up on Amane, so we came back to check it out. By the way, Mahirun herself is here, too, guys."

"S-sorry."

Mahiru, the focus of the conversation, apologized as she returned.

The students still had afternoon classes to get through, so of course Mahiru would return to the classroom, and she would notice them talking about her when she did. That should have been obvious, but it didn't seem to have occurred to anyone.

When Amane glanced over in Itsuki's direction, Itsuki waved his smartphone. Apparently he had been the one to call the girls back. Amane didn't know whether he should be grateful or angry that Itsuki hadn't jumped into the conversation himself.

Mahiru saw that Amane was surrounded, and she put on an anxious smile as she walked over to him. Mahiru, who had spent the day completely attached to his side, ignored the eyes fixed on her.

"Sounds like you haven't been straightforward with them," she told Amane. "…It's hard to put an answer into words, if you ask me why I started liking Amane-kun. But he accepts me for everything that I am, and he respects and cherishes me, so I guess that's it." Her voice was calm, with an affectionate tone.

"As I've said before, Amane-kun may seem cold at first glance, but on the inside, he's gentle, kind, and chivalrous. He's supported me through tough times and doesn't give easy, superficial encouragement. He sees me for who I am and has shown me who he is through his actions. He's also accepted all of my flaws. On top of that, he has encouraged me and helped me until I could stand on my own. It would be stranger if I hadn't fallen for someone like that… It was enough to convince me that he's the only one for me."

Amane felt his face burning up as he realized Mahiru was saying that she had been attracted to him since that time over spring break, when he had seen her with her mother.

He had been meaning to ask her when exactly she had first started liking him, and what she liked about him, but he had never expected to hear the answer this way, in public, lovingly detailed and delivered with a joyful yet bashful look on her face.

Amane was filled with the urge to bolt from the room.

"Amane-kun is the person who accepts me, cares for me, respects me, and looks out for me," Mahiru continued. "He's shy and a little blunt but always kind. The more I get to know him, the more I like him."

"M-Mahiru, please stop there."

"Of course, it would be a lie to say he doesn't have any bad points," she added. "He's pretty hopeless when it comes to taking care of himself, and he suffers from a dire lack of confidence… But recently he's been working hard and getting better, which is just great, in my opinion, and it's really cute that he thinks so highly of me and gets a little intimidated— Mmph!"

"…Please, have mercy!"

Amane was sure he would die of shame if she told them anything more, so in the middle of Mahiru's sentence, he interrupted her by clamping one hand over her mouth. But it was already too late, and the embarrassment was agonizing.

But Amane was not the only one with a red face.

The other students surrounding them, who had all listened to Mahiru's rambling about her sweetheart, were also slightly flushed. Everyone was looking around as if they couldn't stand to be there any longer.

"Why would you say stuff like that?"

"I thought I should use the opportunity to explain how much I like you," Mahiru answered, "and to call attention to your good points, to keep you and the other boys from fighting."

"Well, I don't think it was such a good idea… Plus, a lot of the stuff you said was really embarrassing!"

"What part?"

"…The last bit."

"Well, it's the truth. Of course, those things about you are great, too. I find your flaws just as charming."

"Stop it. Even if that's true, I seriously won't last if you do that again."

Amane bit his lip. It was a complicated feeling, listening to his girlfriend list his shortcomings in front of everybody.

From beside him came a reserved little giggle.

"You don't get to laugh; you're just as new at this as I am," Amane grumbled in a voice only Mahiru could hear, and then he turned away. When he did, Mahiru punched his arm very gently, so she seemed to have some self-awareness.

As Amane was trying to regain his composure after her adorable attack, a soft clapping echoed through the classroom. Chitose was standing there staring at them, hands held together.

"Okay, okay, flirting time is over! The damage is done… Unless there's a challenger among you gentlemen who thinks he can force his way between these two deeply infatuated lovers?"

"Impossible."

"I don't think any of us could win."

"You mean we'd get our asses kicked."

The other boys shook their heads despondently at Chitose's challenge.

Amane, too, hung his head, defeated.

He'd never expected Mahiru to say so much—and in front of everyone, as well. His heart could barely take it. When he looked over at her, wishing he could just

disappear from the shame, he saw Mahiru was wearing a smile that was full of confidence and joy.

"Oh, Shiina-san…" One of the girls in their class, who had been watching the whole scene unfurl from the background, stepped forward to address Mahiru. "How do I put this…? When you're with someone you really care about, you're just like any other ordinary girl, huh?"

Mahiru's eyes widened at first, then she gave a smile that was innocent and impish.

"I mean, I am just a normal girl," she asserted without hesitation, before looking coyly over at Amane again. He wondered whether this might actually make her more popular…then ruffled her hair to hide his embarrassment.

The rest of the day felt extremely long, probably because people kept staring at them.

Although they had deliberately made a display of themselves, it was nevertheless mentally exhausting to be the focus of so much attention, some of which was certainly unfriendly.

By the time the day's lessons finally ended, Amane felt drained.

"Mahiru, let's go home," he called to her. She was also getting ready to head out.

Amane and Mahiru were, as always, part of the "go-home club." Apparently, Mahiru didn't participate in clubs because she worried there would be problems if she joined. She thought her presence might be too much of a distraction.

She'd made that choice precisely because she was aware of her effect on people, but Amane was a little sad that she felt compelled to hold back for such a reason.

Mahiru herself didn't seem bothered by it. She had even pointed out that not being in a club had allowed her to meet Amane in the first place, which had only embarrassed him more.

Mahiru finished gathering up her things and gave Amane a soft smile. "Okay, sorry for making you wait."

Amane felt his expression relax as well. Before, they had always had to go home separately, but now he was happy they could walk back side by side.

"We're headed out; is that okay?"

As he picked up Mahiru's bag from where she'd set it on his desk, Amane spoke to Itsuki, who was beside him. Yuuta had club activities to attend, so he had already disappeared from the classroom.

"Mm, well, I would feel bad for butting in on the newlyweds, so you two go on and flirt as much as you like on your way back home," Itsuki answered.

"We are not newlyweds, dumbass."

“Yeah, I know, you’re more like an old married couple.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

Amane glared at his friend for talking nonsense, but Itsuki didn’t seem to pay him any mind. Instead, he cheerfully answered Amane’s sharp look with his usual flippant grin.

“No matter how you slice it, that’s just how you seem. Don’t you think so, too, Chi?”

“Totally!” Chitose agreed.

“You’re so nosy! Or is that the duty of the idiot couple?”

“Oh, big words! We’re the original, so I’m crowning you two ‘idiot couple the second.’”

“Unbelievable…”

“Now, now, Amane-kun, calm down.”

Amane wanted to flick Itsuki right in the forehead, but Mahiru stepped in to mediate, so he gave up on the idea.

“And you, Akazawa-san, please don’t tease Amane-kun so much.”

“Mahiru…”

“Amane-kun can’t be honest about his feelings, so when you tease him, he gets sulky. So please, go easy on him, okay?”

“Mahiru, not you, too?”

“I’m only kidding…”

Amane had conflicting feelings about Mahiru joining in on everyone’s teasing. But seeing her at school with a genuine, happy smile, he couldn’t bring himself to put a stop to it.

She had always worn the beautiful, angelic, fake smile that everyone admired, with her true one hidden behind it. There was no way Amane was going to condemn the comfortable, lively demeanor that she had now.

That said, he knew he wouldn’t be satisfied until he got her back for the teasing, so he intended to make her pay once they arrived home.

“Come on, Amane-kun, let’s head back.” Mahiru seemed to have sensed something and hurriedly urged him to leave, so Amane smiled and took her hand.

“Okay.”

“One reason I’m glad we made our relationship public is that we can go shopping together now,” Mahiru said softly as they were picking out ingredients for that evening’s meal in the supermarket.

The supermarket wasn't really a place where high school couples went together, and they hadn't planned for it to be a date, but they needed to prepare for dinner, so the two of them stopped by.

"Yeah, I guess we couldn't really go together before, huh?"

"Right. But from now on, we can go shopping and do other things together openly."

"Yeah, we can. And if you like, we can even talk about the menu."

"Yes."

Generally, they decided on the menu ahead of time, but going forward, if there was something Amane suddenly wanted to eat, he could point it out in the store.

Originally, they had planned to make a Japanese-style meal that night, but Amane had seen the lunch of the day at the school cafeteria and told Mahiru that he wanted to have fried chicken instead. So she was going to grant his wish.

She placed a carefully selected package of chicken thighs into the basket that Amane was holding and said, "We've had meat for the last few meals, so a seafood dish would be nice for tomorrow, don't you think?" Mahiru was already planning the next night's dinner as well. "What do you think, Amane-kun?"

"Well, anything is fine… But that's not super helpful, yeah? Let's see, I think I'd like to eat some mackerel."

"It's in season now, so that should be perfect. All right, I'll make roasted spicy mackerel. You don't like too much vinegar, right?"

"Mm-hmm."

Amane smiled and remarked on how well she knew him, and Mahiru responded bashfully, "Well, I have been making you dinner for more than half a year."

Amane had indeed been eating with Mahiru for more than six months, and she'd had plenty of time to get to know his preferences. The better part of the year had gone by since they had started spending time together, and Amane felt moved reminiscing about it.

"…It's amazing to think that we've been hanging out for half a year," he said.

"It certainly seemed like a long time from my perspective, you know? Since you were so obtuse and pretended not to see the truth, even after you noticed how I felt," Mahiru answered.

"Uh… I said I was sorry."

"Heh-heh, I didn't mean to pick on you… Now that I know how you really feel, it's all right."

Amane felt a little uncomfortable as Mahiru gave him an impish smile. But he knew that it was his own fault for failing to make a move in the first place. There was nothing to do but admit his shortcomings.

"Well, from now on, I'll make sure to express my love more openly."

"Thank you very much. I'll do the same."

"…Although if you do it too much, things will get difficult for me, so please do it in moderation."

"What do you mean by difficult?"

"…Please don't bring out my inner animal."

If Mahiru continued to spoil Amane, his brain might cease to function, so he didn't want her to take it too far.

Mahiru seemed to take his meaning. He could practically see the blood rushing to her face as she answered him in a docile voice, "I-I'll be careful…"

Amane nodded, feeling his own face turning red. "Yeah."

Chapter 4

Change of Circumstance, Change of Attitude

"Say, Itsuki?"

"What is it, my friend?"

"…Would you say Mahiru has somehow gotten even more popular since we started dating?"

Amane muttered these words as he watched his girlfriend cheerfully talk with a cluster of classmates who had surrounded her in their classroom.

"Sure would," Itsuki affirmed.

Several days had passed since Amane and Mahiru had started dating, and Mahiru's popularity showed no signs of declining. It actually seemed to be increasing.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say Mahiru had always been the most popular person in their class, but now there were even more people hovering around her.

Amane was grateful that there seemed to be more girls than boys in the crowd, although he did have mixed feelings about the passionate looks the boys were giving her.

"Well, it's pretty obvious why she's more popular than ever," Itsuki added.

"And why is that?"

"How do I put this…? Up to now, it was like she existed on the other side of a glass showcase, but now she seems more approachable somehow. I think it's because their idol, the unattainable Shiina-san, has shown that she's actually just an ordinary girl by being with a guy like you, Amane."

Sure enough, the nature of Mahiru's smile had changed since she started dating Amane. Of course, she still had her angelic smile, but she had started to show her true face as well; she was frequently showing the innocent face of a girl her age.

It was happening gradually, but she was behaving less like the angel and showing more of her real self. That made Amane happy to see, but at the same time, he felt a little bit uneasy about having to share another secret.

He had asked her to do it, to show everyone that she was an ordinary girl, but now that it was happening, he felt depressed to see it and hated himself for his own inconsistency.

"How can I explain it? I really feel conflicted," Amane said, "seeing her true self in public when it used to be something private and special. I know I ought to be happy about it, but somehow, I feel depressed. I think I'm being petty, even for me."

"That's your possessiveness materializing… But look, it's not like the face she has on now is everything, right? I'm sure she has plenty of faces that she only shows to you."

"Yeah, I guess."

The look of embarrassment mixed with happiness that she made when he touched her, the discontented expression with both cheeks puffed out like little balloons when she was pouting, the soft, sweet smile she put on whenever he pampered her, like a sponge that had soaked up a load of honey—all these were faces she showed only to Amane.

"Besides, you're the one who changed her. That smile exists because of you, so don't lose your nerve now. 'Look at how cute my Mahiru is!'—that's how you should be acting."

"…I can't exactly call her 'my Mahiru,' but I'll try not to get jealous."

"What do you mean, you can't say that she's yours? After flirting like that in front of everyone?"

"Well, that was… We didn't do it on purpose."

"It would have been pretty bold if you had! And even if it wasn't on purpose, it still shows just how much you like each other. Enough to make waves. Look around you, man!" Itsuki poked Amane in the forehead, and Amane pressed his lips together into a tight line.

Recently, for some reason, some of their classmates had taken to blushing or looking around restlessly whenever Amane and Mahiru were nearby. Even when they weren't touching very much or talking about anything important, their presence made them blush. Amane did not understand.

He did receive a fair number of looks of jealousy, but more and more, the stares he was getting were lukewarm.

According to one male classmate, who had previously turned on him in jealousy, the fact that he and Mahiru were so close was making other people feel hopeless.

It was embarrassing to hear, even from outsiders, that Mahiru only had eyes for him, but it also made him a little happy.

"Well, I guess she's also showing off that she's her own person and not obsessed with you."

“I’m not worth obsessing over. I don’t stand out as much as Mahiru, and I don’t want people to pay attention to me. I don’t know what to do when that happens.”

“…Well, you might not stand out, but you’re still a solid guy. I don’t need to talk about your academics, and you are a little sarcastic, but fundamentally, you’re a gentleman and the kind of honest guy who doesn’t turn his back on people. From the perspective of a girl who’s looking for some stability, I bet you look like a good catch.”

“It’s kinda…weird hearing you talk about me like that…”

“Okay, that’s a fifty-point penalty for bad-mouthing me. Now then, you never say what you’re thinking, so people assume you’re unsociable, but that’s just perception, and personality-wise, you are surprisingly straightforward.”

“A sure sign that I’m screwed up.”

Even though Amane had been sulking less and less, he was still convinced that he had a bad personality.

He felt like the compliments about being sincere and a good person would be better directed toward a straightforward, agreeable young man like Yuuta, rather than a guy like himself, who had a warped view of the world.

“In my opinion, you’re super easy to read and have an honest personality. Chi says the same thing, that you’re easy to understand.”

“You guys—”

“You go on and on about being screwed up or whatever, but you’re a straight shooter and a considerate guy, I think. You’re a little sarcastic, though.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

Amane turned away peevishly, and Itsuki laughed out loud and slapped his shoulder. Amane jabbed him back gently with his elbow and mumbled quietly, “Thanks, man.”

“You’ve gotten easier to talk to since you started dating Shiina-san, Fujimiya-kun.”

It seemed Mahiru wasn’t the only one experiencing a change in her social life. Amane’s environment was changing, too.

Before getting together with Mahiru, Amane had rarely spoken to anyone other than his closest friends. Besides simple greetings or when it was required for schoolwork, not many people had ever gone out of their way to speak to him, either. But since he and Mahiru had started dating, people had begun to speak to him more frequently.

“…I have?”

Amane was helping out a female classmate who had gotten stuck with cleaning the classroom because the boy who was originally supposed to do it was absent. She was worried about being late to her part-time job.

He wasn't sure how to reply to her sudden assertion, so he shrugged in response.

Mahiru had meant to help as well, but another girl had approached her to ask for some advice, and they were chatting in a corner of the classroom.

Mahiru was very caring that way, as she had always been, and as her boyfriend, he found it very charming, but he also thought it looked like a difficult thing to do.

As she smoothly wrote down the day's events in the class log, the girl on duty for the day glanced over at Amane's face while he finished tidying up the classroom and cleaning the blackboard, and she smiled.

"You've really changed, you know? Actually, before you had your makeover, you were difficult to approach. You gave off an aura that said 'Don't talk to me.' I wondered if you might have some kind of social anxiety."

"Sorry about that."

"Ah-ha-ha, I don't know what to do with that apology. It's just part of your personality, so I wasn't trying to criticize you, all right? I just figured that you're the type to keep your friend circle small but tight-knit. That's why I thought it was interesting you got along with Kadowaki-kun. And now you've gone through an image change, and a few days have passed. You're the same guy you've always been, but I can tell you're just starting to become more social."

"…You're very observant, Kido."

"Well, it's just one of my hobbies, so…"

Amane was surprised that she had been paying quite a bit of attention to him. He didn't know her that well, though she seemed a lot like Chitose, a person who was often at the center of things, lifting the mood with her bright smile. She was popular in a different way from Mahiru—and that summed up what he knew about this girl, Ayaka Kido.

Amane had never interacted with her before, so his impressions of her were based purely on observation, but apparently she had been watching him carefully, even though she had never directly talked with him until now.

"…Well, you noticed an awful lot, even though I kept myself shut away."

"For Shiina-san's sake?"

"No, not for her sake, but for my own."

Mahiru had never wished for him to change, and he wasn't going to claim she was responsible for his new behavior. The desire to change had come from Amane himself.

"It was thanks to Mahiru that I decided to change, but it wasn't for her," he explained. "I wanted to be by her side, so I stopped closing myself off; that's all. I did everything for my own sake."

Amane was confident that Mahiru would have liked him just the same even before he plucked up the courage to take these steps, but even so, he wanted to feel proud that he had made the decision to change for himself.

He felt that he wanted to put in the effort to better himself so he would be suitable enough to walk by Mahiru's side. To put it into words, it was nothing more than his own self-satisfaction. It was Amane's decision; it had not been something Mahiru had asked for. Amane asserted he had done it for himself.

Ayaka, who looked to have finished writing her log entry, was smiling happily. "Shiina-san sure is lucky, huh?"

"…How did we get on this topic?"

"Oh-hoh-hoh, it's just what we were talking about!"

Amane felt like his cheek was about to start twitching. Ayaka was grinning cheerfully, but there wasn't so much as a hint of teasing in her eyes, so he couldn't get mad at her.

"Well, just from that, I can tell you're devoted, mister. If you didn't care for her, you wouldn't try to change. I think it's amazing you would work so hard for the person you love… Oh, you don't like it worded that way, do you? That you would work hard to match her. That's love, real love."

"…It's not a bad thing…right?"

"Oh no, it's good, it's good! I'm sure Shiina-san can also tell that you care about her a lot. Actually, she's looking over here right now."

When Amane glanced at the corner of the classroom at Ayaka's urging, he saw Mahiru waiting there quietly, alone, apparently finished with her conversation. She was wearing a slightly anxious expression, probably because he was having a heartfelt talk with another girl.

"She's looking right at you, huh?"

"She sure is."

"Make sure she doesn't misunderstand this, okay? I've got my own boyfriend, so I wasn't trying to make her jealous or anything."

Ayaka laughed, and at the same moment, almost as if it had been timed, a guy's voice called for her from outside the classroom.

"Ayaka, you done yet? You'll be late for work."

"Sou-chan? Wait up, I'll just go turn this in!"

That reminded Amane that she had a part-time job to rush to, yet she hadn't seemed to be in too much of a hurry. Not enough to prevent her from hanging around having a leisurely chat with the boy anyway.

He made eye contact with Ayaka, and she responded with a playful wink.

“Thanks for helping me out, Fujimiya-kun. Um, as thanks…this is all I have, sorry. See ya!”

In one very swift motion, Ayaka pulled something out of her bag, placed it in the palm of Amane’s hand, turned, and trotted out of the classroom.

Thinking that the girl was like a passing storm, Amane looked down at the thing she’d handed him and saw it was a chocolate bar packed with protein puffs—the kind that Yuuta had suggested he ought to eat after working out.

“She didn’t need to thank me… And why did she choose this?”

Amane stared at the door that Ayaka had left through, wondering why she’d been carrying the bar around in the first place, and whether by offering it to him she’d meant to say that he was too thin and needed to put on more muscle. Meanwhile, Mahiru approached him.

She didn’t look upset, exactly, but she was making an expression like she had something to say.

“…You look like you really want to say something.”

“D-don’t take this to mean I don’t trust you, okay? But you looked like you were enjoying your conversation, so I was wondering what you were talking about…”

As one might expect, Mahiru seemed to be uneasy about her boyfriend talking to another girl.

Amane never had the intention of making Mahiru feel that way and had figured she would have recognized that it was just small talk even from the other side of the room, but if she had been worried about it, he thought he ought to apologize.

“Sorry for worrying you. She was just telling me how much I’ve changed. Even from Kido’s perspective, I must look really different.”

Naturally, Amane was embarrassed to tell her that he and Kido had discussed matters regarding love, so he intentionally omitted that from his explanation, but he was able to tell Mahiru the main thrust of their conversation.

He stroked her hair as he spoke slowly, and she seemed to calm down a little. Her troubled frown slowly softened into a smile. Recently, Amane had figured out that Mahiru liked it when they touched.

“Well, she’s right. When it comes to appearance, you’ve turned into a handsome young man. It’s a very clear difference from before.”

“I did come off as gloomy, so I guess it’s a big difference.”

“Sure, because the previous Amane-kun was a quiet guy with an almost impenetrable reserve. Your old look made you seem completely unapproachable… But if she said you’ve changed, she probably meant something personality-wise, huh?”

“Well, she said I was easier to talk to now.”

“Heh-heh. That’s just because you’ve never been very assertive. You never have trouble when someone else starts the conversation. So when you announced that you were dating me, it was a signal for everyone to come talk to you. And now that you’ve talked with others more, they’ve realized you’re easy to get along with. That’s what I think, at least. Also, you’ve mellowed out, compared to before.”

Mahiru poked at Amane’s cheek with her fingertip, getting back at him for tussling her hair. It tickled, and he felt humiliated by it, so he grabbed her hand and pushed it away from his face.

Instead, he squeezed her hand, then entwined his fingers with hers and tapped the tips of his fingers against the back of her hand, satisfying her craving for physical contact.

Mahiru, who was wearing a more comfortable smile than before, leaned in and whispered, “Amane-kun, you’ve also been smiling more lately.”

In his embarrassment, Amane averted his gaze from Mahiru.

“…I think that changed because I’ve been spending time with you. Also, if you’re going to say that, I should mention that you seem easier to talk to than before, too.”

“If that’s true, it’s because I’ve been spending time with you.”

“…Oh really, now?”

“That’s right.”

He could tell she was smiling happily without even looking at her. Keeping his face turned away, Amane kneaded her hand energetically, as if in payback—and to distract from his obvious bashfulness.

Chapter 5

Something that Can't Be Concealed

By late June, the rainy season was at its peak, and there was a string of days when the weather alternated between clear and stormy.

Droplets of rain fell steadily from a gray and gloomy sky, and the air felt thick and dismal. Everyone was feeling cooped up, probably because the color of the sky was even darker than it had been before.

"…Yuck, it's so muggy!"

"Well, it is the rainy season."

It was only to be expected that the school was also filled with a listless atmosphere. All the members of the sports clubs were sopping wet from practicing outside, which added to the dreariness.

Even Chitose, who loved to run around energetically despite not being a member of any sports club, seemed to have met her match and had collapsed limply down in her seat, where she lay flopped across her desk. Amane hadn't seen her so drained since last year's rainy season. Even her hairstyle was different.

Chitose usually wore her hair down, but on that day, she had it tied into two frizzy bunches—wild from the humidity—with one behind each ear. Despite her efforts to control it, from time to time, a stray lock would escape from the confines of its hair band. There was no doubt that she had struggled considerably to tie it in the first place.

"You seem to be doing just fine, Amane."

"Hmm, well, I do usually prefer a quieter atmosphere. I could do without the humidity, though."

"Good for you. I can't stand it when it's like this. It makes me want to run around screaming."

"The ground is in bad shape, so you'll have to wait until the weather clears up to go wild. If you fell, you'd hurt yourself *and* your clothes would get covered in mud."

"It would never come out in the wash… I'll sit tight, but man…"

Even her voice seemed dulled by the rainy weather.

Considering Chitose was so terribly weary, Amane wondered how Mahiru was doing. He could see her chatting with a group of girls, wearing a gentle smile. Somehow, her expression looked slightly more energetic than usual. Mahiru didn't seem to notice that Amane was watching her, and she was enjoying her conversation.

Amane was staring at Mahiru, thinking about how he was going to spend a lot of time with her when they got home.

Makoto noticed where he was looking and asked, "What, Fujimiya, you jealous of the girls?"

Makoto always observed his surroundings closely, so it was no surprise that he had noticed where Amane was looking, but Amane had to smile because the reason his friend imagined was completely wrong.

"No, I'm not petty enough to be jealous of the girls. It's just, her hair is different today, so it gives her a new look, and I was admiring it."

Amane was too embarrassed to say what had actually been on his mind, so he pivoted to another reason in response, and Makoto responded in an understanding tone, "She's got it tied up today, huh?"

Just like Chitose, Mahiru's hair was tied up. But Mahiru's hair was longer than Chitose's and had a lot of volume, so she had gathered it all into two braids that hung loosely down on either side.

She didn't change her hairstyle often, so it had also been a new look for their classmates. Amane had heard some of the boys muttering that seeing the angel was like a breath of fresh air in the suffocating humidity.

"You seem rather chipper, Mako-chin. I'm jealous, for more than one reason," Chitose grumbled.

Trying desperately to control her hair, which didn't want to listen to her in the humidity, Chitose looked jealously at Makoto's smooth locks, which seemed entirely unbothered by the damp air. She had also been bugging Amane about his hair from the moment she'd first seen him that morning; she seemed incredibly jealous of anyone whose hair was unaffected by the humidity.

"I'm not exactly chipper. Just not as depressed as everyone else. I still have trouble with practical stuff when the rain won't let up, and I'd like the rainy season to end soon. When it's this cloudy, you can't even see the stars."

"Oh right, you're in the astronomy club. I guess when it's like this, seeing the stars is out of the question."

"I mean, we hardly ever actually go look at the stars as a club. If we wanted to watch the stars at school, we would have to get an adviser to accompany us, put in an

application to get access to the roof, and stay at school after hours. It's a whole thing. As a club, we mostly do research and stuff, then watch the stars on our own at home. But either way, it seems like we won't be able to observe anything for a little while. It sucks."

Makoto frowned in vexation, and Chitose nodded in agreement. Mahiru seemed to have finished her conversation and walked over with easy, elegant movements to stand by Amane's side.

As Amane quietly pulled out her chair and urged her to sit, he summarized their conversation to the curious-looking Mahiru, “We were talking about what a pain the rainy season is.”

Mahiru deftly took her seat in front of Chitose and put on a sympathetic smile when she heard the words *rainy season*.

“Well, she has a particularly difficult time with it, don’t you, Chitose-san?” she said. “It’s hard for you to go out and enjoy yourself, and you can’t even go outside to exercise, and your hair also gets messed up.”

“I was certain that Shirakawa-san would be bursting with energy even during the rainy season,” Makoto remarked. “But if I really think back, in middle school, too, you were always quiet during this time of the year, weren’t you? Especially in second year. It was hard to imagine you’d be as hyper as you are now.”

“Agh, I don’t wanna think about middle school!”

Chitose hated talking about things that happened back then, when she’d been a very different person. She clapped both hands over her ears and turned away.

Makoto shrugged and said, “I mean, you can be a little loud, but the way you are now seems to suit you more; honestly, I think it’s better.” It wasn’t clear whether he was trying to soothe her or make her angry so she would perk up again.

“…You trying to pick a fight with me, Mako-chin?”

“That’s not what I meant to do, but…but it’s true that you’re loud… I mean, lively.”

“Don’t bother correcting yourself, I know what you meant!”

Chitose frowned petulantly and beat her fists on her desk. But her face seemed brighter, maybe because some of her energy had returned. Makoto had managed to cheer her up in his own way.

In response to Chitose’s huffy fit, Amane caught Mahiru’s eye and smiled inconspicuously.

Ultimately, the rain continued through to the end of the school day, and the sky was the same forbidding shade when it was time to go home.

Because of that, the well-traveled road to and from school was unusually quiet, as most students were in a hurry to get home.

As for Amane, he drew Mahiru close to him underneath his large umbrella, sharing it like sweethearts do, and walked along at a pace that was comfortable for her.

He held Mahiru's bag as always, so it wouldn't get wet. Maybe because the two of them were alone, Mahiru let out a slightly disheartened and exhausted-sounding sigh. Amane glanced over at her.

She noticed his stare and took her bag back from him. "…It's so humid during the rainy season that your mood gets somber, too, don't you think?" Mahiru mumbled, playing absently with the ends of her hair, which were sticking out at random angles a little more than usual. "And it's hard to do your hair. Mine gives me such trouble, and it tangles easily."

"It sounds like it's more difficult than usual to set it right. Personally, I think the way you have it today is cute, but I'm sure it's annoying to deal with."

Amane personally considered getting to see Mahiru style her hair in lots of different ways to be a perk, but he figured that, from a girl's perspective, properly arranging it was a big deal. Especially for Mahiru, who cared about her personal appearance more than most.

The way she had her hair tied at the moment looked more subdued and sweeter than usual, but Mahiru herself probably did not like it all that much.

"C-cute?" After pondering the word, Mahiru's eyes darted around bashfully, and she slapped Amane's arm with her fingertips in an attempt to hide her embarrassment. "…Anyway, it's hard to look after my hair in the summertime, you know? At the height of summer, there's the problem of sunlight causing damage, so proper care is essential. In the winter, it's dry, and in the summer, it's humid, and UV rays can cause harm… The way I care for it changes depending on the season and the weather, so it's hard to keep up with."

"Being a girl sounds difficult."

"That's why I'm jealous of your hair, Amane-kun."

Amane blinked when the topic changed to him, and Mahiru looked up at his hair with slight envy. That morning, it had seemed like too much work to style his hair with wax, so all he had done was run a comb through it like he did on the weekends.

"It's nice and smooth despite the humidity. As far as grooming, it doesn't demand that much, does it?"

"The most I do is use that shampoo from the beauty salon."

"That's because your hair was healthy to begin with. If you took really good care of it, it would be even smoother and shinier."

"I don't really want that, but… Well, if I have the time, I'll make the effort."

If it made it more enjoyable for Mahiru to touch his hair, then he figured making time to take care of it would be worth it. Not that he was unhappy with it as it was, and

Mahiru never seemed to have a problem with it, either, but if he thought it might make her even happier, he was glad to do it.

He looked at Mahiru's face and saw that she had a faint smile—so faint that it was barely visible. The rain was obviously affecting her, and there was less vigor in her expression than usual.

Gazing at her pale cheeks, Amane let out a quiet sigh. "You know, it really sucks that I can't go jogging in this weather. I had a routine going, and now I feel like I might revert to my old idle habits."

It wasn't a good idea to go for a long run while it was pouring rain. The rain would cool his muscles down even if he warmed up before running, and he wouldn't get a very good workout.

And so for the time being, he was going to take a break from running. To compensate, he planned to step up the weight training for his legs.

"You say that, but haven't you been doing more weight training than usual already?"

"That's because I don't want to backslide, now that my efforts are actually starting to show."

"Hee-hee, you're so serious; what a good boy. Very admirable."

Mahiru looked pleased and softly patted Amane on the back. It tickled, and with the hand that wasn't holding the umbrella and his bag, Amane got his revenge by doing the same to Mahiru.

Afterward, he looked at the sky. The horizon was still dark, but something about it seemed more pleasant. It was probably because the rain wasn't as intense as it had been. Now it seemed to be gently enveloping them.

Of course, the real reason he felt at ease was due to the person at his side.

"Well, there are some downsides to this weather, but walking with you in the rain like this isn't bad at all. Rainy days have their own sort of charm. The color of the sky and the feeling in the air is unique, and I like it. Taking a quiet stroll on a day like this seems romantic, too."

The rainy season might be despised by girls who especially cared about their appearance, but Amane liked it. It was a quiet time wrapped in a gentle feeling.

He liked the overcast sky giving off a dull, calm light, the gentle sound of rain that tickled his ears, and the faint fragrance of the rain, with the hydrangeas in full, vivid bloom as if to decorate the otherwise faded scenery.

The landscape around them wasn't simply dark and hopeless. The rainy season, and the mood and environment, felt comfortable to Amane.

Besides, he had Mahiru by his side.

Just by softly squeezing her hand, the world looked brightly colored again. If he changed his attitude and focused on Mahiru next to him, the scenery seemed more peaceful and charming. Just by walking together, the world looked perfectly lovely.

"The rain was what led to us meeting, so I like it. And I think that walking through the rain like this with you is a priceless moment."

This was their first rainy season together as a couple, and Amane found meaning in the very act of walking side by side. It felt more precious because he knew that this exact moment would never come again.

"Besides—"

"Besides?"

"On rainy days, there are more bargain items left at the supermarket. And there are fewer people out, despite the sales, so it's easier to pick up good deals!"

As a joke, Amane added the last reason for liking the rain with a smile. Mahiru looked taken aback, but gradually her expression also relaxed into a gentle smile.

"Hee-hee, that's the sort of thing you learn by living alone for a long time. I get it, though."

"That's fine; who cares? Some types of knowledge are just practical to have."

"I'm not saying it's bad, hee-hee-hee."

Mahiru giggled cheerfully, before slowly settling down and looking up at Amane with quiet eyes.

"Amane-kun, you're someone who can live a quiet and colorful life, aren't you? You see the beauty and fun in everything around you."

"I'm not sure what you mean?"

"Oh, I just suddenly had the thought. It's wonderful that you can find enjoyment in all sorts of things from all sorts of angles," Mahiru mumbled with a hint of jealousy. She sounded a little lonesome.

"But I think the only reason everything I see seems to be so vivid is because you're by my side, Mahiru. Really, you taught me to see things I had never seen before. And I hope you keep teaching me, too."

When Amane turned to look directly into Mahiru's caramel-colored eyes, he could see them waver for a moment and begin to fill with tears. But they weren't tears of sadness, and slowly an expression of joy appeared on her face.

"…I've also learned all sorts of things from you, Amane-kun. And I'm looking forward to more from now on, too."

"That's good to hear."

He had gotten Mahiru to promise to stay by his side, whether she realized it or not. He hoped he could keep her to himself for a long time.

Amane had no intention of giving up his spot beside her, no matter the cost.

Still holding Mahiru's hand, he smiled, then peered into her eyes again. She was wearing the most relaxed expression he had seen on her all day.

"…Well then, let's hurry up and think of something you can do to enjoy yourself on a rainy day once we get home."

"Like what?"

"How about we buy some small side dishes at the supermarket, then watch a drama or one of the DVDs I have at home, or listen to some music and take it easy? On a day like this, it's best not to work too hard—and to spend time relaxing. I could tell you weren't feeling too well today, physically and mentally."

When he stared intently into her caramel-colored eyes, he could see that he had hit the mark. She flinched, and her eyes started darting around.

Actually, he had thought something was off when they had walked to school together that morning and was convinced once they'd reached the classroom. Mahiru was not feeling well.

Her usual smile was lacking some of its luster, and although it was hard to tell because of the dark, dismal, rainy atmosphere, her complexion was worse than usual as well. Moreover, her motions had been just a bit more deliberate, as if she was trying to move as little as possible.

Whether it had to do with the weather or a feminine issue, it was a private matter, and he couldn't ask. But it was obvious that she was feeling lethargic, and she seemed like she was struggling. Amane wanted to make sure she took it easy for the rest of the day.

When he looked at Mahiru anxiously, she seemed to have resigned herself and leaned her head against Amane's arm as they walked.

"…That perceptiveness of yours is both good and bad. I can't hide anything."

"It's because you're bad at hiding stuff. When you're not feeling well, your movements and behavior change a little bit."

"For example?"

"If I tell you, you'll try to hide it, so I'm not saying."

Amane could tell when Mahiru was smiling, or walking, or even moving her hands differently, but if he told her that, she would deliberately try not to do it, so he wasn't going to say anything.

Mahiru looked dissatisfied, but there was no way Amane was going to give in, so he turned down her request and rubbed her hand that he was holding. Her hand felt a little colder than usual, which he figured was due to the rainy weather.

“You ought to rely on me a little bit more, okay? Here, let’s go into that grocery store. We’ll get side dishes and… Well, if there’s anything you want me to make, I’ll make it.”

“…Rice balls.”

He realized she was really having a hard time when she obediently answered without putting up any resistance. He thought with slight remorse that he should’ve taken better care of her.

But Mahiru didn’t seem like she was in danger of collapsing, and at school, the last thing she wanted to do was seem like she was struggling. Amane was probably reading too much into things, but still, he thought it was probably best to stay close to her side.

Amane adjusted his grip on Mahiru’s hand as she leaned on him limply, and he smiled down at her. She had stopped trying to keep up appearances and was wearing a listless expression.

“I can make something a little more elaborate than that, you know? You can ask me to make whatever you want.”

“I’d like to have the rice balls that you make.”

Amane had been sure she was holding back because he wasn’t a very good cook, but apparently Mahiru really was happy with his rice balls. She looked up at him with somewhat frail eyes.

“Is that okay?”

“Sure thing. If you want them, I’ll make them. I’ll make the best ones I can!” Amane smiled playfully.

Mahiru also smiled happily. “I’m expecting them to be good, okay?” She seemed to be feeling more at ease, so Amane, maintaining a gentle expression, headed for the supermarket with Mahiru in tow.

Chapter 6

What Changed After Starting to Date

“Come to think of it, Fujimiya, I know you started dating Shiina-san after Sports Day, but has anything else about you changed?”

The school sports grounds were unusable due to the long spell of rain, so the girls were having gym indoors while the boys had health class. Just as their teacher left the classroom, the student sitting in front of Amane asked him that question.

It was just a guess, but Amane figured the inquiry was prompted by their teacher’s warning that since Sports Day was behind them, it was time to focus on their studies. As far as Amane was concerned, his attitude in class was the same as ever, or maybe even more serious than before, so he hadn’t thought those words were directed at him. But the mention of Sports Day must have unconsciously reminded the other boys of him.

The rest of the boys must have been curious, too, because they all turned to face him, which gave Amane some mixed feelings.

“Well, I’ve started getting ambushed like this at school,” he muttered.

“Sorry. But other than that? How far have you two gone?”

“…We’ve hardly done anything,” Amane replied. “At most, we’ve started walking home together and stuff.”

About two weeks had passed since Amane and Mahiru had started dating, but nothing had really changed. After all, they had plenty of physical contact before making it official, and Mahiru was still coming over to his apartment like always.

If he had to name something, it would be that he had been trying to make more deliberate physical contact, but as far as their daily lives were concerned, things were still the same.

“No way!”

“Why would I need to lie about that?”

“Well, I mean, come on…”

“Look—”

“Shiina-san’s fallen so hard for you, so, like, I thought you’d be fooling around more or something.”

“Fooling around…? Not really; stuff like that is—”

“Amane! You’re such a prude. We can’t count on you for any juicy stories.” Itsuki had apparently overheard the conversation from nearby. “You know, any normal couple would be fooling around… You two are unbelievable!” he said, exasperated.

Amane stared daggers at his friend, but Itsuki just laughed, not at all bothered.

“…I don’t even know how to respond to that. I’m not going to force us to do things just because it’s what couples are supposed to do. Everything’s like it always was.”

“So that means you guys have always been fooling around, right?”

“Listen here—”

“I think Yamazaki’s got a point,” Itsuki insisted. “You might think you’re being careful, but it’s plain for everyone to see. Even when I try to stop you two, you flirt. So I figured if that’s you guys trying to tone it down in public, you must be even more flirtatious at home.”

Amane didn’t mean to do so, but he had ended up making the case that he and Mahiru had always been intimate. He started to insist it wasn’t how it sounded but knew the other boys probably wouldn’t listen anyway, no matter what he said.

“Wait, what do you mean ‘at home’…?”

Amane cursed silently as the boys surrounding him started to make a fuss. Too late, he realized Itsuki had added some unnecessary information.

“Shiina-san is usually over at Amane’s place, and I bet when they’re alone they flirt like crazy. They’re already way past dating; they’re practically married, man.”

“Itsuki…”

“If you try to hide it, people are gonna suspect something, so I’ll just go ahead and say it. Some people have already spotted you going back to the same apartment building, so really, I’m just setting the record straight before you end up with a bad reputation.”

Itsuki gave Amane a meaningful look, then pressed his lips together tightly. They both knew Mahiru would be upset if she became the subject of weird rumors.

It would definitely be bad if people thought Mahiru was spending the night already, even though they had just started going out. It wouldn’t make Amane happy at all if people said those kinds of things about her.

She had stayed over before, and he had lent her his bed, but not once had they ever slept in the same room together. Mahiru had pleaded with him to join her once when she was half asleep, but he hadn’t gone through with it, so surely that didn’t count.

"Now that I think about it, you did say that you were neighbors with Shiina-san… Did you mean she's super close by?"

"…Well, we live in the same building, so she's at my place a lot."

"So that means if we go over to your place, we could go to hers, too…"

"I won't invite you up, so you'll get turned away at the entrance. If you make any suspicious moves, the security guard will come and throw you out. You can count on that."

Of course, the apartment building where Amane and Mahiru lived wasn't fancy enough to have a concierge, but it did have decent security. The building was designed for fairly wealthy residents, with an inner courtyard, and security guards who would deal with anyone acting suspiciously.

"Come on, that was a joke… So in other words, Shiina-san hangs out at your place a lot, Fujimiya?"

"H-hangs out? Well…yeah, we spend quite a lot of time together, but—"

Mahiru wasn't just hanging out. Aside from bathing and sleeping, she spent almost all her time at Amane's apartment. She was practically living there. But Amane knew if he said that, it would set the boys off again, so he chose not to mention it.

But even with just that information, the other boys drew closer to him, their eyes wide. From the sound of their chairs scraping one after another across the floor, it was fairly shocking news.

"Hold up, hold up, that's not right!"

"It's like something from a porno game plot. The old 'childhood friend' trope! It's not right!"

"And in the meantime, you two look like you have the most wholesome relationship! If anything, we're losing our minds because you're such a Goody Two-shoes. The only thing we could do is to tell you to make a move."

"Wha…? Make a move? We only just started going out; there's no way."

They had been dating for two weeks, and Amane was not in a hurry to do anything like that. And even if he did want to, he was worried that Mahiru would think he was only interested in sex.

Amane had no intention of rushing things. He would leave it to Mahiru, instead of pressing the issue and trying to force things to move forward. Anyway, they hadn't even kissed yet, so there was no way they were going to jump straight into doing more.

"It's better to let time pass and take it slow," Amane said. "We'll do stuff like that when we're both ready. I'm not going to force it on her."

Amane felt embarrassed to be talking about the subject and ended the conversation with an anticlimactic pronouncement.

Itsuki looked around at the other boys and shrugged dramatically. “You see? This is one of those things that Shiina-san likes about Amane. He’s a toootal gentleman. He’s so cautious and considerate, you could almost say he’s impotent.”

“Fujimiya, are you out of your mind? Are you made of flesh and blood? How can you even call yourself a man?”

“I see how it is. You’re all here to make fun of me.”

Amane scowled, wondering how anybody could see anything other than a man when they looked at him.

From all sides, he heard things like, “If you had a girl as cute as the angel by your side, why wouldn’t you pin her down?” and “This is what a loser looks like,” which made his mouth twitch.

“It’s none of your business, so just shut up,” Amane insisted. “We’re taking things at our own pace, so we don’t need anyone butting in.”

“You know, I heard that Shiina-san has been getting advice from Chi,” Itsuki mentioned.

“Well, you can tell Chitose to be careful about what she says. Mahiru doesn’t need to learn everything that Chitose has to teach.”

Even though Mahiru had a good head on her shoulders, she was a beginner when it came to adult relationships, and Amane was worried that Chitose might give her false expectations.

“So you’re insisting that you should be the one to instruct the innocent Shiina-san?”

“Cut it out, man.”

Amane glared critically at Itsuki, wondering why he had to interpret everything that way, but Itsuki feigned innocence.

“Now, now. Besides, even if I told Chi to stop, the other girls are probably telling her all sorts of things, too. Shiina-san’s in love, she’s adorable, and they’re gonna give her advice.”

“And what good does that do me, if they give her all kinds of weird ideas?”

“You get to appreciate Shiina-san’s charming, adorable efforts, of course.”

“Well, I guess I can’t argue with that, but just try putting yourself in my shoes; think of the shock my poor heart will have to take.”

“Isn’t it nice that she’s working so hard for you?”

When Itsuki put it that way, Amane couldn’t possibly refute it, so he just frowned and kept his complaints to himself. Itsuki must have known how he would react because he cackled with laughter.

“Well, I can’t stop Chi from trying to help, since she’s decided she wants to encourage Shiina-san’s love for you.”

“…It’s your fault for not knowing what kind of advice your girlfriend might be giving.”

“I don’t think she’s telling her anything too extreme. Even Chi has some tact, after all.”

“I wonder…”

“Just the other day, I saw Shirakawa lecturing Shiina on how to cuddle, telling her, ‘Amane will be happy if you do things like this,’” another boy added.

“Itsuki, you have a duty to control her…”

“Like it’s my fault?!”

Amane looked accusingly at Itsuki and said, “So she is teaching Mahiru all kinds of weird stuff?”

It was easy to imagine Chitose had, for better or worse, been filling Mahiru’s head with all sorts of information about male-female relationships. The only one who could keep Chitose in check was Itsuki, so Amane thought that Itsuki ought to be the one to stop her.

Amane let out an exasperated sigh, and the boys surrounding him stared at him in silence. The atmosphere was indescribable.

“So this is just you boasting about your love life?” one of the boys asked, summarizing what everyone wanted to say.

“…That wasn’t my intention,” Amane replied. But there wasn’t a single boy there who believed him.

“That reminds me, you guys were all riled up during gym today; did something interesting happen?”

Classes were over for the day, and they had returned home. Amane hadn’t been prepared for Mahiru’s sudden question, and he dropped his smartphone, letting it fall to his lap. It was quite heavy because of the wallet-style case, so he felt a bit of pain in his thighs as he returned Mahiru’s gaze, and their eyes met. She was sitting beside Amane with a very puzzled look.

She obviously knew the boys had been talking about something. They had kept chatting after the period ended, so she must have heard voices when she came back to the classroom.

“Oh, well no, um, please don’t worry about it.”

Amane averted his eyes. He couldn’t possibly tell her that they had been asking how far he and Mahiru had gone.

“Huh…?” Mahiru sounded upset. “Usually when you say something like that, it’s exactly the sort of situation I should be worried about.”

“It was just regular boy talk; we had some catching up to do, you could say.”

“Uh-huh… The type of conversation that you can’t repeat—or don’t want to?”

“It’s not that I can’t repeat it, it’s just embarrassing.”

His reply seemed likely to invite misunderstanding, but Amane was ashamed to explain their conversation in detail, so he settled on being vague. Mahiru stayed quiet as she stared at Amane.

Is she fed up with me or displeased…? He felt a slight twinge of pain somewhere near his stomach, but Mahiru gave an uneasy smile.

“Ah, if you don’t really want to say, that’s fine; you don’t have to. It wouldn’t be nice for me to pry; you deserve your own privacy, too. I’m sure there are some things that boys only talk about with other boys. Some topics that girls ought not ask you about.”

“I have mixed feelings about how understanding you are, but… Well, it’s nothing that serious. Would it be okay to not talk about it?”

“I mean, you would never ask me what I talk about with other girls, right?”

“I guess not. If I went about it poorly, I would probably offend you, though I wouldn’t ask anything you didn’t want to answer. Even if you’re my girlfriend, that doesn’t mean it’s okay to tell you how to lead your life, you know?”

Amane was smart enough to know that girls had all sorts of secret conversations among themselves. Even though he was curious about what Mahiru might have discussed, he was also afraid of the answer, so he didn’t really want to ask. Still, he figured there were probably people who would have liked to pry.

Mahiru was her own person with her own life, so Amane intended to respect her privacy, even if she was his girlfriend.

That’s the difference between them and me.

This time, Amane looked directly at Mahiru, and she smiled softly, looking amused.

“I feel the same way,” she said. “I don’t think it’s right for me to try to know everything about you just because I like you. Even if there are things I don’t know, that doesn’t change how I feel about you, Amane-kun.”

“…That’s one of the charming things about you, you know.”

“Right back at you.”

Mahiru giggled in her elegant voice and leaned against his arm. Amane felt self-conscious because he could sense her trust in him. Tracing the pad of his finger lightly over the smooth back of her hand, he whispered, “Is it really all right if I don’t tell you?”

His conversation with the other boys wasn't something he particularly wanted to share, but neither was it something he felt like he had to hide. He was prepared to tell her if not knowing made her anxious, but Mahiru smiled, still leaning against him.

"If you want to tell me, I'll listen, but if it's something you'd rather not share, then I won't ask."

She left it up to him to do as he pleased, and Amane pondered over what to do for a full ten seconds before slowly opening his mouth to speak.

"…Well, um, how do I put it? The guys were asking me how things have changed since we started going out, and they asked me how far we've gone, and other typical questions like that."

The other boys probably already had their suspicions, but they hadn't said them out loud, so Amane hadn't responded to them. But they had also expressed interest in how things had changed for him, so he had decided to make that the main point when telling Mahiru.

Amane spoke hesitantly, but Mahiru seemed to understand. "I guess they were curious about it, huh?" She smiled wryly. "But things that have changed since we started dating… I guess my awareness of you has. Like, I touch you a lot on purpose now, but that's it."

"That's because we were already close to begin with. Rather than saying we've changed, I feel like our surroundings have instead."

The two of them had only realized it upon later reflection, but they had been touching each other in moderation before they even started dating. They held hands when Amane was escorting her to places, embraced when consoling each other, and once, Mahiru had kissed his cheek for revenge. They'd been so touchy that it was strange they hadn't become a couple sooner.

It was extremely embarrassing to think about, and Amane wondered why he hadn't been able to return her affection at the time. He had been cautious—no, cowardly—so he couldn't work up the determination.

Of course, he was ashamed of how pathetic he'd been, so moving forward, he wanted to be able to take the lead with Mahiru, and he intended to put in the effort so he would be able to do so confidently.

"You're right about that. And you've totally fixed your appearance, which changed how people see you. It's gotten easier for everyone, even girls, to talk to you."

"No, the only time girls speak to me is to cheer me on, so…"

"But I've been hearing people say you look cool, too, you know? And that your smile is cute."

“That smile was probably directed at you, though… You’re the only one I see,” Amane whispered quietly to calm her. He couldn’t help imagining that she was feeling a little jealous.

Even as her cheeks flushed slightly, she pressed her head against him and didn’t seem at all dissatisfied.

Amane thought about how cherubic and cute she looked when she did that, but he knew that if he said it out loud, she would scold him to not treat her like a child, so he kept it to himself and smiled quietly.

As Amane gazed lovingly at Mahiru, who seemed to be in a good mood, he recalled what had happened when he was surrounded by his classmates and remembered there was something he needed to ask her.

“Anyway, I did hear one thing that I want to ask about.”

“Oh?”

“Mahiru, it seems you’ve been getting advice from Chitose and some of the other girls. They’re not telling you anything weird, right?”

He stared at Mahiru with the unspoken additional question of *And you’re not telling them any details about our relationship, right?* Mahiru looked up awkwardly at Amane and then suddenly averted her gaze.

“…Only a little bit—”

“They are, aren’t they? Well… I won’t tell you not to talk to them, but please try not to expose too much of our personal lives. It’ll be super embarrassing if rumors start circulating.”

“I-I’ll be careful.”

Consulting with her friends wasn’t an issue, but Amane didn’t want Mahiru to share too much about their relationship. Of course, he trusted Mahiru to exercise good judgment, but she could also be a little careless sometimes, so Amane figured it would be best to warn her, just in case.

Mahiru shrank back into her seat, perhaps thinking that she had already overshared, even if they were her friends.

Not that Amane hadn’t also consulted with Itsuki and Yuuta, but he had always chosen his topics carefully and had never asked them anything particularly deep. He was starting to suspect that maybe Mahiru had some major complaint or insecurity about their relationship.

“…Are you really that anxious about dating me?” he asked.

“A-anxious? It’s not like that… Um, I j-just asked them how I could make you happy.”

“But I’m perfectly happy just being with you…”

“Yes, of course… You’re the type who says it’s more than enough just to be with me. You don’t desire much, and you rarely make requests of people, isn’t that right?”

“I feel like I could say the same about you.”

All of what she’d said also applied to Mahiru herself, but after blinking several times, hiding her caramel-colored eyes for a moment each time they closed, she smiled at him coquettishly.

“…I can be quite greedy, you know? I want to have you all to myself; I want to pamper you and be pampered.”

“Right back at you, as you would say.”

“You want to be spoiled?”

“…W-well, I like you, so yes, and I want to do the same for you, too. As for keeping you all to myself, well, I’ll try to only do that when we’re at home.”

Mahiru probably didn’t think so, but Amane had always considered himself to be the more possessive one.

He knew, of course, that Mahiru had her own feelings and her own life—and that she should be able to live however she wanted. Amane did want to respect that, but…be that as it may, she was his girlfriend, and he often caught himself wishing he didn’t have to share her with anyone else.

He knew Mahiru was popular, and he could accept that for what it was, but he still wanted to pull his cute girlfriend into his arms and keep her for himself. He wished she would show her sweet side only to him and that she wouldn’t be affectionate with anybody else. That was how deeply Amane loved Mahiru.

Man, that’s heavy, even for me…, he chided himself. But for some reason, Mahiru smiled pleasantly, looking tickled.

“…I found one thing that has changed about you since we started dating, Amane-kun.”

“What?”

“You’re more honest about expressing your emotions now—and showing love.”

Far from balking at Amane’s heavy feelings, Mahiru looked up at him bashfully and leaned in close, happy to accept him.

Amane also thought that he had become more honest, compared to before they were dating. He had pined after Mahiru for so long, and he wanted to treasure her and never upset her with his words. Thus he’d naturally become gentler, as he tried his best to express his love so that Mahiru would never feel disheartened.

“Well, I figure that nice words aren’t enough. If I don’t show you properly how much I love you, you’ll sour on me, I hear.”

“That’s just like you, Amane-kun.”

“Is it something you’re unhappy with?”

“No, it’s a good point, of course, but just… Sometimes it’s bad for my heart, you could say.”

Amane felt a surge of love for Mahiru, who had her cheeks puffed out slightly as if he was being unfair, and he patted her head.

“I don’t want to hear that from you; you’re just as bad.”

“And what would you say I’ve done?”

“Everything about you is adorable, and you leave yourself so defenseless. It’s tough to bear.”

“…You really are bad for my heart,” Mahiru said, slapping Amane’s arm playfully.

Naturally, he couldn’t do the same thing back to her, so he tapped the pad of his finger against her cheek in a tickling way as revenge.

Chapter 7

Nothing Too Sexy

"Amane-kun, I've got someplace to go today, so is it all right if we head home separately?" Mahiru asked. It was early July, and they'd just been about to leave school together, as always.

It was an unexpected request coming from Mahiru, who always wanted to walk home with Amane, and he caught himself staring at her without meaning to.

As a rule, Amane accompanied her whenever she had to make a side trip, so the fact that she was gently stopping him from doing so meant it was probably something she didn't want him to know about.

But he could tell from Mahiru's expression that it wasn't anything she felt particularly guilty over, so he wasn't worried about it.

The sun set later in the summer, so it should be fine as long as her errand didn't take a long time. Though if he was to state his true feelings, he would have liked to go home together.

"Mm, got it. I'll see you later, then."

He knew that either way he was going to have plenty of time to spend with her at home, so he respected Mahiru's wishes.

She looked relieved by his answer but then opened her eyes a little bit wider, as if she had suddenly realized something, and gave him a look like she was raising her guard just a little.

"…Don't walk home with any other girls, okay?"

"Do you think I would do that?"

"You wouldn't, but there's a possibility that you'll be asked, you see. That's… Well, I'm not saying they can't, but I don't like it. Other girls have been talking to you lately, and…"

It was a miracle Amane didn't react out loud.

...Don't tell me...she's jealous?

It should have been obvious from the way he acted toward Mahiru that Amane hadn't been asked by other girls, but apparently, Mahiru had started worrying about it.

Actually, the only girls who had spoken to him had done so to show their support for his relationship and wish him good luck, so there was no need for concern.

Even though he still felt slightly uncomfortable, Mahiru was looking up at him with an imploring, anxious expression. He wanted to stroke her hair because of how cute she was, but there were eyes all around them, so he restrained himself.

He had messed up once before and everyone had huddled around to see Mahiru's smiling face, so naturally he wasn't about to repeat that mistake.

"It's all right. I only have eyes for you, and I haven't told anyone I'll walk home with them. Unless you count being dragged around by Chitose."

"…That's good to hear."

If it was Chitose, it seemed like it would be okay. But to begin with, she had Itsuki, so she was definitely not interested in Amane. And he had also never looked at Chitose that way, so Mahiru probably felt at ease.

Mahiru relaxed her shoulders, seemingly relieved by Amane's words, and this time, she gazed up at him with a hint of embarrassment.

"Also, um, just because I don't want there to be any chance of a misunderstanding, I'll tell you where we're going."

"You don't need to keep it a secret?"

"N-no."

He got the sense that she was fairly hesitant to say it, but he waited patiently for her to continue.

"W-well…we're…going shopping."

"Gotcha. That doesn't really seem like anything to be embarrassed about."

"I'm going with Chitose-san…u-um—to buy a swimsuit, so—"

"…A swimsuit?"

Sure enough, it was July, and they were being sold in all the stores now.

In the shopping mall that they frequently visited, a special shop had opened just for selling swimsuits, and Amane had fresh memories of girls from their class talking about going to buy some.

But he had never thought Mahiru would.

After all, Mahiru couldn't swim.

That was what she'd said, and she had even chosen a school where swimming wasn't a compulsory subject, so it had to be true.

But Mahiru wanted a bathing suit.

"…Weren't we going to go to the pool together…?" she whispered as she drew her body near shyly.

In response to her words, Amane stiffened, then he covered his face with his hand.

…I wish you wouldn't make that kind of face when you say it…

Sure enough, the other students in the classroom were looking their way.

From looks of confusion to tepid smiles, a variety of expressions were directed at them, and Amane felt unsettled by a mixture of discomfort and embarrassment. Even under normal circumstances, he had trouble keeping it together when he saw Mahiru looking bashful, and in this atmosphere, with people watching, he could hardly stand being there.

"…I see. Um… Enjoy your shopping."

"Th-thanks… What kind should I get?"

"Nothing too suggestive," he answered immediately.

Anything that fit Mahiru's style, even a swimsuit, was sure to be suitable, but Amane would have preferred that it didn't expose any more than necessary.

After all, it had only been several weeks since they had started dating, and for the most part, he hadn't seen much of her bare skin.

At school, she buttoned her shirts all the way up and always wore tights. She dressed so modestly that he sometimes worried she might overheat.

At home, she never wore clothes that exposed her chest, and she wore a lot of long skirts. Whenever she wore shorts, she also had on tights underneath.

In other words, Amane had never seen much of Mahiru's body. He'd never even had the chance to.

Under those circumstances, if she chose a sexy swimsuit, Amane would probably wind up curled into a ball on the floor for a while.

Mahiru's eyes went wide, and she blinked in surprise at Amane's definitive answer, then she snorted quietly.

"That's a very Amane-kun answer."

"I would die. So pick one that's not too flashy."

"Heh-heh, what to do…?"

"Mahiru—"

"I'll consult with Chitose-san about what will make you happy."

Mahiru still looked a little shy, and Amane pressed his lips together tightly.

I'd better send Chitose a message telling her not to recommend anything weird.

It was a matter of life or death. He had to stop her, to save himself.

Amane made up his mind to send a message to Chitose, who was currently not in the classroom, and poked Mahiru in the cheek. She looked like she was thinking of something mischievous.

At the end of the day, Mahiru refused to tell him what kind of swimsuit she had purchased. She dodged the question with an impish answer, saying "You can look forward to when I put it on."

He had gone ahead and warned Chitose, but it was doubtful whether she had listened. If anything, from the way she had gleefully told Mahiru that she thought her choice would make him happy, he was sure she had recommended something that showed a lot of skin.

"I'm begging you, not something too flashy," Amane's grumbling echoed in the otherwise empty bathroom.

He had gotten into the bathtub to wash his sweat off, leaving the post-meal cleanup to Mahiru after she volunteered to do it, but he couldn't help worrying about the swimsuit.

Amane was a high school boy, so of course he had fantasized about what kind of swimsuit his girlfriend might wear.

Something that generously exposed her slender body would certainly be attractive. Mahiru had always had a curvy figure, so if she wore a bikini or something, he was certain he wouldn't be able to gaze directly at her.

His heart was pounding just imagining it, and his body was burning up. Part of that was because he was soaking in the tub, but he was hot for another reason, too.

...I'm sure anything would look good on her, but I would have a hard time looking at her or even standing next to her.

Amane thought he had a right to see—and a right to stand by her side. But next to her, he would be practically invisible.

He glanced quickly down at his own body, but it was still a far cry from perfect. He had never had much meat on his bones to begin with, so he was already starting to see the bumps of his abdominal muscles, but he had yet to reach his ideal body type. Most people would have considered him kind of scrawny.

No matter how he thought about it, he didn't feel like a particularly strong or stylish kind of guy.

He wished his physique was a little more solidly built, but he had always assumed that since both of his parents were slim, his body type was probably hereditary, so there was nothing he could do. To make up for it, he was tall, so he felt very grateful to his parents for that at least.

"…I should consult with Kadowaki and increase my strength training a little more."

He had already established a good foundation, and recently, he'd been lifting even heavier weights. If he worked a little harder, while being sure not to overdo it, then he'd definitely be able to improve his physique before debuting his bathing suit body.

He was determined to stand by Mahiru's side, so he couldn't slack off and would need to try even harder so he could have confidence in himself.

Amane sighed softly and dipped his face halfway into the bathwater.

He had worked himself up imagining Mahiru in her swimsuit and himself next to her. Now he was too hot.

Normally, when he soaked in the bathtub, he would be in there for about ten minutes, so his anguish was obvious when it took him over half an hour before he got out.

Since he had spent more than three times the usual amount in the bath, it was about ten thirty. He confirmed the time by checking the waterproof clock that he kept in the bathroom. Mahiru typically went back to her own apartment at ten o'clock, so she should have already left.

With that presumption, Amane wiped away the water dripping off his body and immediately got dressed. He was very warm from having soaked for too long, so he decided to let the air conditioner cool him off and didn't put on a shirt.

Wearing only a pair of sweatpants, with a towel over his head, Amane imagined his parents scolding him for looking so sloppy as he left the bathroom and returned to the living room.

Wondering if there were any good shows on television, Amane walked in with his eyes on the screen. But as soon as he got there, he saw a familiar curtain of flaxen hair hanging down the back of the sofa.

She hasn't gone home yet?

Normally Mahiru wouldn't have been there, but oddly enough, she had stayed.

She was looking down a little bit, moving her arm while staring at something in her hands. She was probably tending to some schoolwork that she would usually have done at home. Amane approached her with interest, marveling that she was, as ever, the hard worker.

"It's unusual for you to be here so late."

Mahiru must have been concentrating, because when Amane spoke to her as he picked up the remote control from the coffee table and changed the channel, she finally noticed his presence, lifted her face, and froze.

"Yes, uh, ah…"

“What is it?”

“Uh, why—why aren’t you wearing anything on top…?”

It was how he typically looked after getting out of the bath during the summer, so nothing seemed particularly off to Amane, but Mahiru was clearly flustered and covered her face with her hands.

He could see her skin flushed red in between her fingers.

“What do you mean, why? I’m hot.”

“P-please don’t come out like that while I’m here.”

“I mean, I figured you had gone home… It’s already ten thirty.”

“I wanted to say goodnight before I left.”

So that’s why she’s still here.

Amane sat down beside Mahiru. As he did, her shoulders flinched in surprise, which made him laugh.

“…Are you really that embarrassed?”

“Of course I’m embarrassed!”

“But if you bought a swimsuit, you must have been planning to see me in mine, too, right? But I can’t be in the living room like this?”

“Uh…”

Mahiru had said she was going to buy a bathing suit because she planned to go swimming with him.

In that case, surely the thought had crossed her mind that Amane would be in his, too. It was only natural if they were going together.

In other words, she must have assumed she would see him half naked.

Yet she was getting so flustered at the sight of his bare torso. It made him wonder whether they would actually be able to go to the pool. If looking at his body shook her up this much, he wondered how she would react to seeing other boys in their swimsuits.

It wasn’t the first time—she was embarrassed to see his chest before they were together and seemed opposed to seeing boys’ skin at all. He was unsure whether they would be able to go to the pool or the ocean.

“…It’s nice that you bought a swimsuit, but I think it’s possible that you might not be able to go to the pool.”

“Th-that’s probably true, but—”

“In that case, how about getting used to it now, ahead of time?”

At the moment, he was less exposed than he would be in his swimsuit, so it was a chance for her to grow accustomed to seeing him like this, but Mahiru shook her head vigorously.

“I—I can’t. I can’t look at you as you are now.”

"Why not?"

"…B-because you're…like, really sexy."

"Sexy?"

"You just got out of the bath; I really can't."

Apparently, the reason why she hadn't made eye contact with him since he entered the room wasn't just because she could see his skin. Despite what she'd said, Amane didn't believe he was particularly attractive, but it was obvious that Mahiru thought differently.

Amane did think that Mahiru was even more alluring when she'd just gotten out of the bath, and he figured that anyone probably found the person they liked even more appealing in such a state.

As the one who was usually getting flustered by Mahiru, seeing her react to him like that made Amane feel kind of good, in a sadistic sort of way, but he knew that if he teased her too much, Mahiru would probably get upset.

"If you hate it that much, I'll go put on clothes, okay?"

"I—I don't hate it or anything, but…w-wait a second, I'll do my best."

"No, if it's really an issue, I'll get dressed."

"I-if I don't get used to it, I'll be in more trouble! Since I'm going with you to the p-p-pool."

Mahiru spoke very bravely and glanced over at him, her face red and her gaze wandering unsteadily over to other spots around the room. Amane watched her struggle without rushing her.

He couldn't exactly complain, since if he were in Mahiru's position, he would definitely be letting his eyes wander, probably even more than she was. It likely wouldn't just be his gaze, either—his whole body would probably try to make a run for it.

"…I know you've been putting in a lot of work, Amane-kun, and as someone who's been rooting for you, I'm happy to see that you're getting results."

"Mm-hmm."

"B-but…u-um…recently you look too good; I can't take it. Ever since you found your confidence, you're too good-looking, and it's not fair!"

"Not fair…?"

"I'm the one whose heart is pounding all the time!"

"…I can't just let that one go."

Amane knew that Mahiru's heart beat fast for him, but she couldn't possibly think that his heart wasn't pounding, too. Just like her, his heart was thumping harder than usual.

On top of that, Amane was sitting by Mahiru's side burdened with other troubles that she probably didn't have. From his perspective, she was the one who wasn't playing fair.

He decided to make her realize a little bit of what he was feeling, so he extended a hand out toward Mahiru's back and pulled her dainty body toward him.

She must have been unprepared because she wasn't looking at him, and she easily fell into Amane's arms, her cheek coming to rest against his bare chest.

Her small frame was trembling noticeably.

"Amane-kuuun—"

"…You can yell at me for sexual harassment, or you can run away if you like, but I want you to understand just a little of what I'm feeling."

Embracing a girl while half naked was something that Amane would normally never do. He hadn't intentionally undressed in front of Mahiru after all, but in the moment, there was no helping it.

"My heart is beating out of my chest… As a guy, I've got a lot more to worry about in this kind of situation."

Of course, Amane was the reason why they were in this situation, so he wasn't trying to put any of the blame on Mahiru. But being alone together with his girlfriend at night, he felt like he couldn't settle down no matter what. It was absurd to think that Mahiru was the only one whose heart was pounding.

In his arms, Mahiru had her cheek against Amane's chest and seemed to be listening to his heartbeat, blinking repeatedly in surprise with a bright-red face.

He seemed to have gotten his point across, so he took his hands off of Mahiru, but she kept leaning against him and didn't try to move.

"…I'm sorry; that was rude."

"N-not really… U-um…Amane-kun, when you do stuff like that, it's really…i-it's so manly."

"As opposed to…?"

Amane furrowed his eyebrow as he wondered whether he had just been insulted, but when he saw the panic in Mahiru's eyes and felt her trembling, he loosened up his expression.

"I-it's not that I didn't think you were a man. It's just, um…when I'm pressed directly up against you like this…it really makes me aware of it."

She answered him honestly, even though it seemed like it was a little bit difficult for her to say. Though hesitant, she touched Amane's chest with her hand. Slowly, she caressed him like a fragile object, and at first, Amane felt ticklish until the embarrassment set in.

"…Amane-kun, you're so slim…"

"Sorry for being skinny. I must seem weak."

"That's not true at all. Just—y-you're more solid than I thought. You're sturdy; I was surprised…"

With the tip of her finger, she slowly traced over the center of his torso.

He wasn't really building much muscle, but the results of his training were apparent, and his midsection had firmed up somewhat. Mahiru gently traced her finger over his abdominal muscles like they might break, though they wouldn't, checking the feel of them.

Even though he was doing this for her, so she could get used to his bare skin, he was struck with a jumble of extreme uneasiness, frustration, and shame—and he found himself struggling desperately to restrain a groan.

"I've…never touched a guy's body before, so this is new to me—and surprising…"

"…You're allowed to at any time you like, but if you touch me too much, you'll have to deal with the consequences."

Mahiru's eyes were perfectly clear as she blinked up at Amane, though he could see a hint of shyness. Amane's heart ached with a subtle suspicion that he might be the only one feeling guilty about this.

However, the way she was stroking his skin, tracing over it with her finger as if to get the feel of it, was driving him nuts, so naturally he wanted to stop her. But he didn't want to make her uncomfortable.

"I'm going to have to touch all the same spots that you are."

Teasingly, he gently ran his hand across Mahiru's waist, and she let out a feeble shriek and jumped in surprise. Mahiru had always been ticklish and would start trembling at the slightest touch, so he had touched her very lightly, but she had reacted super sensitively.

He had only brushed his hand against her once and then stopped, intending to withdraw and apologize immediately if she seemed upset. But rather than displeasure, Mahiru lowered her eyes in seeming embarrassment and pressed her forehead against Amane's chest.

"I—I like it when you touch me, Amane-kun, so go ahead, but…j-just d-don't tickle me, okay?"

Mahiru looked up at him, still leaning close against him, seemingly completely unaware of her own weaponized charm.

Her words, her expression, her gaze, her posture, her sweet scent carved away powerfully at Amane's sense of reason. If he received one more push, the stronghold of his judgment would simply crumble away.

For the moment, he bit his lip, and the pain barely kept him in check. Then he peered into Mahiru's eyes. He could see his own reflection in them, which held no doubt or suspicion.

"…I can touch you?"

"Wh-why, is there a reason why you shouldn't? I'm sure I asked you before to please touch me. And I think you have a right to touch the same parts on me that I did on you. W-we're a couple, so it's fine, right…?"

"N-no, well, I may just be a bad guy, but I think this situation we're in is unwise… Do you understand?"

If they took one more step forward, they would never be able to go back. He asked to be sure, since he had a feeling Mahiru hadn't yet realized that, and after dramatically blinking her caramel-colored eyes, Mahiru's face instantly went up in flames like an on-demand water heater.

After opening and closing her mouth like she was trying to say something but finding herself unable to string any words together, Mahiru drew her legs up and hung her head. She didn't seem like she was going to run away. But she did appear to be ashamed or embarrassed and was bright red all the way to her ears that were peeking out from beneath her hair.

"Uh, ah, um… A-actually, maybe another day would be better…," Mahiru managed to mutter in a hoarse, trembling voice.

Amane looked away from her and nodded. "…That's what I'd like, too… N-not that you can't touch me, but…it seems like we're moving really fast, and I'm kind of scared of what might happen."

Amane was determined to treasure their relationship and to really value the time and experiences that they built up together. He didn't think it would be good to skip over so many steps and give in to their teenage instincts. That kind of self-control was difficult for a high school boy like Amane, and he worried that if she let down her guard, he would likely carry her off to the bedroom. He didn't want to risk losing Mahiru over something like that and resolved to resist the temptation.

Mahiru's body coiled up again as she listened to Amane squeeze out an explanation. She looked over at him, and he gently stroked her hair, enduring shame that he couldn't hide.

"I'm begging you… I want to treasure you, so please, let's take it slow," he mumbled quietly.

“I-I’ll keep that in mind…,” Mahiru answered bashfully in a defeated voice.

Chapter 8

Don't Feed the Animals

It had been one month since they started dating.

Amane, who hadn't even kissed anyone before, still wasn't sure how he was supposed to touch Mahiru.

They'd held hands and hugged each other but hadn't taken it any further than that.

Even though they had embraced the other day while he was shirtless, nothing else had happened. Amane was sure that if Itsuki somehow heard the story, he would be subjected to plenty of teasing. Of course, Amane didn't agree with Itsuki's judgment on the matter, but he also understood why his friend might point out that it wasn't very manly.

Amane wanted to take their relationship to the next level, but he was also afraid of moving forward. If she rejected his advances, or if he hurt her and made her cry, Amane was certain he would never recover from it. And he was terribly worried that she would think he was a loser.

He glanced over at Mahiru, who was sitting beside him.

The day after she said it was all right to touch her, she was fidgety and restless. However, several days had passed since her remark, and perhaps she understood that Amane wasn't going to try anything, because she had gradually returned to her usual demeanor.

Even Amane thought it was weird that he was feeling more awkward than her, but in the end, he couldn't help being nervous.

"…Is something the matter?"

Mahiru had apparently noticed his gaze, and she looked confused. She didn't seem to have noticed his internal conflict.

"N-no, I was just… Well, I don't know how I'm supposed to touch you, Mahiru."

He added quietly that he wanted to, but not carelessly, a statement that sounded weak as soon as he said it.

Mahiru's eyes widened as she recalled again what had happened the other day, and her gaze shifted nervously. Apparently she hadn't been thinking about it at all. Her reaction made Amane laugh.

"So what do you want me to do?"

"…Is that something you should ask me?"

"W-well, you're the one getting touched, right? I don't want to do anything you don't want, and I'd like to be as gentle as possible toward you."

He'd prefer to avoid rushing ahead and acting on his own feelings, because he knew that his conscience would never let him rest if he made Mahiru uncomfortable. His parents would certainly reprimand him if they ever found out.

Precisely because this was his first relationship, and there was no room for error, Amane knew he should be as considerate as possible, and since it would also really hurt him if she cried or ended up hating him. He wanted to grant all of Mahiru's wishes.

With his heart set on that, he stared back at Mahiru, who squirmed like she wanted to run away but then leaned against Amane's shoulder.

"I-it's fine; you can do whatever you like," she said. "Just don't tickle me or pinch my belly."

"…You don't have anything to pinch, do you?"

"Well, I do keep a close eye on my figure, but whether or not I have anything extra there, girls generally hate getting their bellies squeezed by their boyfriends."

"Well, I don't plan on doing anything you would hate, but…um, is it really okay?"

"I told you: It's fine."

Mahiru had stated definitively that he could do as he pleased, but still, maybe she felt there was something a little scary about allowing a guy to touch her however he wanted, even if that guy was her boyfriend. Through the shoulder that she was leaning on, Amane felt a slight shiver run through her body.

He was happy she accepted him, but on the other hand, he knew he would have to be careful because it would still be problematic if he was pushy about it.

He really wanted to touch her but didn't know what to do, so after puzzling over it for a long ten seconds, Amane pushed her up from his shoulder and embraced her gently like he was trying to wrap himself around her whole body.

He could tell that her small frame was shaking and curling up with surprise inside his arms, so in an effort to relax her, with gentle, deliberate movements, he patted her back to calm her down.

He didn't want to frighten her, and with that in mind, he touched her with careful gestures. Mahiru relaxed and leaned against him.

"…You don't have to worry; I won't do anything more."

"I-I'm not particularly scared… Just, well, first I'm embarrassed, and…I was expecting more, I guess."

"Expecting…?"

"You know…a kiss or something."

Mahiru whispered the last bit weakly as she nuzzled her cheek against Amane's chest, and this time it was his turn to tremble.

"…A-Amane-kun, I know you really love me, and that you've been cherishing me like some treasured object, but…I want to really feel your love."

Amane felt a swell of emotion at Mahiru's adorable words. Although she always radiated of cuteness, she unconsciously hit her boyfriend with an extra-large helping, and Amane's head started spinning.

If he wasn't careful, he was going to grasp her tightly and never let go, so he had to bite his lip hard and suppress that urge.

"I know you don't want to rush me, and you're not going to…to coax me into anything, but…"

Mahiru was mumbling in a tearful voice, with an expression that was shy and apologetic.

Unable to bear it any longer, Amane buried his face in her collar.

"…I can't take this anymore."

His quiet whisper seemed to have reached Mahiru's ears, since she was trembling uneasily. He didn't want her to misunderstand, so he peered into her teary eyes and continued.

"Here's the thing, Mahiru. When you say stuff like that, it's hard for me to resist. But if we go forward, I'm never going to want to go back."

Hoping that hearing his plea would do her some good, Amane squeezed her in a tight embrace as he mumbled his objections.

"I think you ought to value yourself a little more, Mahiru."

"I—I do, but we're in love, so I want you to do as you please."

"Please stop with the suggestive statements. You shouldn't test a man's restraint."

"Test…?"

"…If you understand how much I love you, like you say, then you're being a terrible temptress."

Amane did consider she might be stirring him up on purpose, knowing he absolutely wouldn't make a move, but he concluded there was no way that innocent

Mahiru would do such a shrewd thing. In other words, she was seducing him without even knowing she was doing it. That was the scariest thing about it.

Maybe because she sensed Amane's face pucker as he tried to resist temptation, Mahiru's cheeks flushed slightly as she looked up at him with a sweet gaze.

"…I trust you; you know?"

"I feel like my trust is being held hostage."

"Th-that wasn't my intention, though. I see that you're conflicted, and somehow…that makes me happy. Wait, I—I don't mean that I'm enjoying this or anything, okay? But the idea that you treasure me so much, well, I can really tell, and it makes me feel all warm and fuzzy—and so loved…"

In spite of himself, Amane looked at Mahiru after she whispered these heartfelt words and received a fleeting, bashful look in return.

"In the past, I learned all sorts of things from the housekeeper, Koyuki-san, so I know that people like you are incredibly rare, Amane-kun. People who listen to the feelings of others and respect them. I know that you respect me—and that you treasure me. That's exactly why you gave me the right to choose earlier."

It was precisely because he treasured her that he didn't want to do anything that would clash with Mahiru's feelings—this sentiment of Amane's had indeed been conveyed to her, and it was with that understanding that Mahiru was begging him to act on his desires.

Amane was speechless as Mahiru looked up at him timidly once again.

"From the bottom of my heart, I'm so glad I fell in love with a guy like you."

Seeing Mahiru wearing a smile packed full of joy, happiness, and love, Amane reached his limit—he pressed his lips against her tender, soft, pale cheek.

Her cheek was incomparably smooth compared to his own skin, and he gave her the tenderest of light kisses, putting all his love into it. Starting from the spot he had kissed, her pale skin flushed pink.

"All right, there… I kissed your cheek; was that okay?"

He had followed through, but now he was worried that it would have been better to warn her before he did… Although, it was already too late for that.

An amused, happy smile blossomed across Mahiru's face. "…I feel like that's not something you need to ask after you've already gotten permission."

"I couldn't help it… I just—my self-control was at its limit, you could say. Sorry for indulging myself."

"You really are a conscientious person. Of all the things you could do to me, the only ones I would hate are… Well, I wouldn't like being tickled or having my cheeks pinched, but really, there's nothing else, okay?"

Then Mahiru gently brought her lips to Amane's cheek in retaliation. After kissing him, she moved them close to his ear as he sat there, frozen.

"Listen, I'm never going to object to getting a kiss from my boyfriend."

Oh my god…!

Agonizing over what a bad boyfriend he had been, to be blind to that obvious fact, Amane planted another gentle kiss on Mahiru's porcelain cheek.

He forced himself to get ahold of the desires that were swirling around inside of him, and he embraced Mahiru's small body again, simply appreciating how lovable his girlfriend was.

"So stop me if I get crazy, please. This is already a lot…"

"Crazy?"

"I feel like I might lose control, you know? I've got no willpower to spare. I know that's pretty pathetic, but…"

"…And if you did go wild, what would happen?"

"I'd probably make you cry."

He wasn't going to force her into anything, and he obviously didn't want to make her cry, but Amane felt like there was something inside him that he couldn't control. Embracing her, and feeling her soft body against his, filled him with urges that were hard to resist. The very fact that he had endured it thus far was practically a miracle.

He suspected Mahiru might not stop him if he kept going, but it was precisely because of how much he cared for her and wanted to treasure her that he couldn't allow himself to take things any further.

Instead, in order to rein in his hopeless urges, he loosened his hold on her just a little.

Amane caught a whiff of her sweet scent, which somehow seemed even stronger than it had been before, as he slowly pressed his lips against her neck.

His touch was light on her slender neck, which was so pale that the blood vessels showed through, and her slim body shivered. But she didn't seem to dislike it. She just twisted a little bit as if it tickled.

Slowly, he slid his mouth down, and when he reached the base of her neck, Amane filled his nose with her scent and bit down gently.

Of course, he didn't bite hard enough to leave behind tooth impressions. Though it was a light nibble, Mahiru made a high-pitched noise. But she didn't try to escape from his arms. She gripped Amane's shirt tightly and let him do as he pleased.

Her irresistible sweetness threatened to overwhelm him again, but he kept ahold of himself, and finally, in a spot that he figured would be covered by her school uniform, he gently sucked on her skin.

Staring at the single dot of rosy color on her otherwise pale white skin, Amane felt guilt, affection, excitement, and a faint sense of dominance and conquest. When he was done, he was left with the keen feeling that he was a despicable man.

He slowly looked up and saw Mahiru staring at him with teary eyes and a bright-red face. There wasn't the slightest bit of hatred in her gaze, but her expression was filled with embarrassment.

Amane immediately knew that he had overdone it, and he hung his head. "Um… I'm really sorry about that. That wasn't right."

Mahiru opened her tightly pursed lips and, without hesitation, bit down suddenly on the base of his neck near his shoulders, just above the collar of his T-shirt.

He could almost hear the adorable sound effects as she chomped down, then kept nibbling as she tried and failed to suck at his skin with her mouth. From the way she was moving, it was more like she was trying to eat him.

After a moment, Mahiru pulled her mouth away. She made a face as if she didn't understand why she had failed to leave even the faintest impression on Amane's skin. She must have felt his eyes on her and looked up at him with an expression that was somewhat sulky and childish, yet also daring.

"…Fair's fair."

The tone of her voice challenged him to complain. Along with the fact that she hadn't even been able to leave a mark, it was so adorable Amane thought he might die.

Though he was filled with a desire to hug her tightly and carry her right off to bed, Amane somehow managed to hold back. "You dummy," he groaned as he buried his face in the base of her neck again, careful not to start sucking on a new spot.

Chapter 9

The Start of Summer Vacation

“Hyah-ha! Our summer vacation is finally heeere!”

“Why are you going wild?”

It was late July. With the closing ceremony finished and the end of homeroom, the students were finally free. They excitedly set about discussing their summer plans.

Itsuki had been wound up ever since the moment they were dismissed, while Amane looked on, sweltering in the heat.

“Why? Isn’t it obvious? Today marks the end of those hellish classes. Heaven… Paradise has come at last…!”

“Just because you don’t like studying doesn’t mean that everybody else hates it.”

“Zip it, brainiac. And anyway, you’ll have more time to make out with Shiina-san, you know?”

“Make out… Listen, man, it’s not like we’re on each other twenty-four seven.”

Rather, they spent most of their time doing their own thing, not even talking to one another.

When they were spending time together in the same space, someone was either studying or doing their chores; they weren’t just flirting.

Mahiru, of course, had her schoolwork, and in addition, she exercised for her health and beauty—and took care of her appearance. While she did that, Amane would go running or do his weight training, so the assumption that they were always joined at the hip was completely wrong.

“…If I’m being honest, it seems you’ve got a mental block against flirting, so you do it unconsciously,” Itsuki said.

“How so?”

“I bet you make eye contact and smile from time to time, and lean against each other, and hold hands…”

Amane couldn’t deny that.

He and Mahiru didn’t embrace all that often, but smaller forms of physical affection were a part of their daily routine.

It was hard to know whether that was considered flirting, exactly, so Amane hadn’t counted that, but apparently it did.

“Look here. You two are so flirtatious, I get hot just looking at you. Right, Yuuta?”

“Ah-ha-ha, that’s right. How can I put it? I get embarrassed just watching you guys.”

“You too, Kadowaki?”

“But you know, thanks to the PDA, very few people are going to try to bother you, so I wouldn’t say it’s all bad.”

Sure enough, there had been less harassment and fewer complaints than Amane had assumed were in store for him, and at least in their grade, none of the other boys seemed like they were going to try to make a move to win over Mahiru.

A big part of that was probably due to the way she acted, how Mahiru didn’t even try to hide the fact that she loved Amane. She didn’t so much as look at any other boys, so they seemed to have mostly given up on her.

Even so, Amane had prepared himself for criticism and bullying, but instead, many of his classmates seemed almost protective. Frankly, Amane couldn’t figure out why.

“You know, I bet the real reason that nobody’s come after you is ’cause they’re scared of Shiina-san.”

“Scared?”

“You bet; she’s keeping them in check, you know? I mean, nobody’s got the guts to try anything, after the way she acted on Sports Day. If anyone tried to come after you, Amane, she’d definitely flip out.”

“Flip out… I can’t even imagine it.”

“Me either, but I bet she would be totally pissed. We all know that she does well in her studies and sports and that she’s got a pretty face and a hot body. And on top of that, the teachers all think she’s great, so she would be a scary person to make your enemy. Plus, you know it would be extra terrifying if a person who is usually so nice got mad at you.”

Amane quietly agreed with his friend’s assessment.

She is probably the type of person who you shouldn’t anger.

He had already said so, but he could hardly even imagine Mahiru becoming furious.

But he did know that it would be a bad idea to tick her off.

Mahiru always wore a calm smile and wouldn't get angry at any little thing, but Amane had a feeling that when she crossed her boiling point, she was liable to knock her opponent out with a sound argument and a smile. Thinking back to what happened on Sports Day, it was a definite possibility.

Amane knew better than to infuriate Mahiru, and anyway he was pretty sure she would get sad before she got angry if he did something wrong. He resolved to do his best never to upset her.

"…Are you boys planning to make me mad?"

As Amane was making this vow to himself, Mahiru and Chitose approached the boys.

"Oh, Shiina-san! No, not me—we were talking about whether you would get mad if Amane did something."

"You should know the answer to that already… Of course I wouldn't lose my temper. We would talk it out calmly, face-to-face, until he understood my feelings."

Her broad smile sent Itsuki trembling terribly.

Mahiru was telling the truth. She was most likely to explain her feelings at length and get the other party to understand her. Using a smile and a sound argument as her weapons, she would corner the other person and compel them to agree with her. She was really someone you wouldn't want to make enemies with.

"Amane, don't you dare make Mahirun angry!" Chitose scolded.

"Hey now, I'm not even doing anything!" Amane replied. "…Actually, Mahiru, what would make you angry?"

"…An affair, maybe?" she answered.

"Do you think I'd cheat?"

"I don't think that at all! It's a ridiculous notion, given your nature. You're the type of guy who is endlessly devoted to the people you cherish."

"…Thank you."

"Although, that kind of devotion can wear you out. I think you stopped at kissing my cheek because you ran out of steam."

"…Mahiru."

"N-no, wait. I didn't mean to complain…and I did get questions about that mark."

"Great, let's forget it."

If she was going to elaborate on how the mark came to be, Amane would rather just not bring up the subject.

"Ah, is that—?"

"…Itsuki."

"Yeah, yeah, you two, my dear friends, are so painfully shy. We do that much on a regular basis, right, Chi?" Itsuki called out to Chitose. The two of them quickly started pawing at each other.

Amane grumbled internally, *We're not up to that level like you two are!*

Of course, the couple who had been dating for two years had reached certain milestones that Amane and Mahiru hadn't gotten to yet. He had heard about those kinds of things from Itsuki before, so he wasn't exactly surprised, but for some reason or other, he did feel somewhat embarrassed.

Mahiru must have heard some stuff from Chitose, too, because her face flushed red instantly, so he knew she was probably imagining the same things as him.

……All that is probably a ways off, though.

They hadn't even kissed on the lips yet, so joining their bodies together was a dream beyond a dream. He didn't want to rush to it, either. It was better for them to approach each other slowly, at their own pace.

When Amane made eye contact with Mahiru, her face got even redder, and she looked down, so he averted his eyes from his intensely embarrassed girlfriend.

"Mahiru, when is a good time for us to go visit my parents?" Amane asked. After the closing ceremony at school, Mahiru had gone home before coming over.

He knew that he really should have already decided on the dates, but he had been in a happy daze since they started dating. They had also been busy with all sorts of things, so he hadn't found the chance to talk to her about it, either. His mother had said that any time was all right, so if Mahiru's schedule was open, he figured he would go home in August like he did every year during the Obon holidays.

In response to Amane's question, Mahiru blinked sharply several times.

"…Ah, or maybe you don't like the idea of coming home with me?" Amane stammered.

"N-no, I just remembered that we had talked about me visiting… Um, any time is good for me." Mahiru anxiously waved her hand in front of her face and insisted she wasn't opposed to the idea.

Amane smiled meekly and moved on to his next question. "Gotcha. I wonder how long we should stay? Last year I went back for about two weeks, the week before and after Obon."

At the moment, he didn't have any standing invitations from Itsuki or Yuuta and his friends around the time of Obon, and most people generally spent that time with their

families anyway, so that was probably the best time to go. They wouldn't have school, either, so that also made it a good time to travel.

Last year, Amane had stayed a little over two weeks because he enjoyed not having to do any housework while he was there, but this year, Mahiru would be with him, so he needed to take her plans into account. He figured one to two weeks would be enough time to relax.

"I don't really have any plans, so… Chitose-san and I haven't decided when we're going to hang out yet, so you can choose when you want to take me along with you."

"Okay then, about two weeks should be good. That's a pretty long time; are you sure it's all right?"

"Yes."

Mahiru said she didn't have any particular plans, so they settled on the number of days that Amane had proposed.

As a girl, Mahiru apparently needed to bring lots of clothes, so she suggested sending their luggage ahead of time, and Amane messaged his mother to let her know to expect it.

He didn't anticipate an immediate reply, since his mother was probably at work, but he was sure she would happily agree and try to get them to extend their stay. Amane's mother loved anything cute, and she was extremely smitten with Mahiru.

"I tell you, I bet my mom's going to be thrilled."

"Heh-heh, I bet you're right."

"…You'd better prepare yourself, though."

"Huh?"

"My mother is gonna want to spend time with you."

Amane was certain his mother was going to make a pest of herself. She had always wanted a daughter, and she was liable to conduct herself as if fortune had granted her one at last—and dote on Mahiru the whole time they were there.

"I appreciate her company, though…"

"Well, that's good, but…the thing is…"

"What?"

"…I wonder whether we should tell my parents that we've started dating?"

When Amane hesitantly mumbled this question, Mahiru stiffened.

Amane hadn't told his parents yet, and apparently neither had Mahiru. If they went to his house together, his mother would be able to tell from the way they acted, and she would probably tease them. He was conflicted over whether it would be better to try to mitigate the damage by saying something in advance.

But the scary thing about his mother was that Amane had no idea whether telling her beforehand would make it any easier—or if it would conversely make it worse.

"…Wh-what should we do? It would be embarrassing to make a formal announcement."

"I know. But she's definitely going to pry."

"Well, since I'm making their precious son a part of my life, I think I should address them personally."

"I'm the one who's going to make *you* a part of *my* family, though…"

Amane said it almost as if he considered it a settled matter, but the moment Mahiru heard it, her face turned bright red, and she hugged a cushion tight.

"…You know I appreciate that you can say stuff like that without hesitation, but saying it too easily is a bad thing."

"Which is it?"

"Well, as long as you only say it to me, it's a good thing."

"Do you think I would say that about anyone other than you…?"

Amane wondered what Mahiru was worried about. She must have known full well that he didn't even look at other girls.

"…That, too, is another good quality of yours. And I think it must be the result of your father's upbringing."

"Why my father?"

Amane was confused by Mahiru's sudden mention of him. She leaned against Amane, still holding the cushion, so for the moment, he just stroked her hair.

He did it lovingly, not to try to appease her, but out of pure affection, and Mahiru let him do it, casting her eyes down bashfully. She looked like she was enjoying it, so Amane figured she didn't mind.

"…I bet you're going to be a lot like your father in the future, Amane-kun."

"Really? I don't have as much of a baby face as he does, though."

"Not in the looks department, but on the inside."

"I'm not confident that I'll turn out as calm and composed, either."

"…That's not what I meant…dummy."

Mahiru whispered that last word so quietly it just barely reached Amane's ears, and she leaned against his arm, so when he deliberately shifted his body back, she fell and plunked down into his lap.

He watched the caramel color disappear and reappear several times behind her blinking eyes, then he smiled and cupped his hand around her cheeks.

"I can't be as gentlemanly as him, but I'd like to spoil you in my own way."

"…See, this is what I was talking about."

“My dad indulges my mom way more than I indulge you.”

“…He does. I think I would drown in it.”

Still resting her head in his lap, Mahiru placed her own hand on top of Amane’s, as if to cover it, and closed her eyes with a peaceful expression.

A smile appeared on Mahiru’s lips as she leaned up and pressed her cheek against him.

“…Maybe you could drown me a little more?”

“As much as you like… Although, we’d be in trouble if you did at the pool next week.”

“…Dummy.”

This time, she delivered the adorable insult in a peevish voice, loud enough for him to hear clearly, and Amane laughed out loud and stroked Mahiru’s cheek again.

Chapter 10

If Anything, You're Cute

Today, they visited the pool, and Amane was getting changed in the locker room, feeling vaguely nervous.

He and Mahiru were at a water park on the outskirts of the city, and they had split up to get changed, but…Mahiru had been the subject of many stares from other guys before they even entered the facility, and it wasn't hard to imagine that they would all be mesmerized by her in her swimsuit.

In a situation like this, Chitose could have been a good distraction if she were there, but today, it was just the two of them. Mahiru had made puppy-dog eyes and said she wanted to go alone together, and there was no way he could turn her down.

Resolving that he would have to protect her somehow from the groping hands of other guys, Amane changed into his swimsuit, pulled on his rash guard, and left the locker room.

He arrived at the agreed-upon meeting place and waited for Mahiru to show up, but she was taking a long time.

He wasn't going to complain; it was something he had, in fact, anticipated. He figured it probably took girls longer to prepare than guys, and that their locker room might be more crowded.

Appreciating again how tough it must be to be a girl, Amane leaned back against the sturdy lamppost they had chosen as their meeting spot.

Even though it was summer vacation, it was a weekday, so while there were relatively fewer people than there might have been, the place was still pretty packed.

As Amane was standing there absently watching people of all ages, men and women, pass by in their swimsuits, he caught sight of familiar flaxen hair in the gaps between the crowd.

"Amane-kun."

As expected, his own darling girlfriend was headed his way.

But as soon as he saw her, he wondered whether it might have been a mistake to bring her to the pool. The eyes of many other patrons were following her as she approached him.

Normally, he wasn't so conscious of it, but Mahiru was truly extraordinarily beautiful. She was equal to any model in a magazine—in fact, he thought Mahiru was even prettier.

So as expected, she was going to attract a lot of attention in her bathing suit.

"Sorry to keep you waiting; the locker room was crowded."

"Uh-huh."

They were right by the water, so Mahiru hurried over, without running, and stood before Amane, who was smiling faintly.

Now that she was standing right in front of him in her swimsuit, Amane really wasn't sure where to look.

Mahiru seemed like the type whose skin would turn red and painful if she got too much sun, and she was much more careful about sun exposure than most people, so she was strikingly pale. There wasn't a single blemish on her milk-white skin, which had never known a sunburn. Standing there under the summer sun in her swimsuit, she was dazzling—in a single word, *magnificent*.

Amane had always known that Mahiru was slender, but she really was fit. Though she was slim, she didn't look too skinny, and her figure retained an unmistakably feminine softness. She wasn't just thin, she had curves in all the right places, like the soft, full line of her bust beneath her frilly white bikini top.

Amane had always assumed Mahiru chose clothing that minimized her bust, but he'd never realized the extent of it. Yet they weren't so big that they looked unnatural or mismatched with her small stature. They were the ideal size, well-balanced and just right to fit in his hands.

He was shocked that modest Mahiru had picked a bikini, but there was nothing lewd about her choice. The large frills at the top hid her cleavage, and on Mahiru, the outfit looked elegant and clean.

Seeing Mahiru in her bathing suit made his head spin. Amane had never looked at anything racier than the pinups in the backs of magazines. Seeing his girlfriend in one was dazzling.

"…How is it?"

Mahiru had come close enough to touch, and she asked for his opinion with her hand on her chest, as if she was feeling a little embarrassed.

Because Amane was a little taller, he found himself staring down at the shadow of her bust beneath the frills, gulping.

"Amane-kun?"

When he didn't answer, Mahiru inquisitively touched his arm, and finally he unfroze.

"…D-does it suit me?" she asked.

There was no question about that. In fact, it suited her too well, and he didn't know how to look at her.

"Absolutely. It looks great on you. I wish we were alone; it's very cute."

"Th-thank you."

Amane shared his thoughts, knowing that he was supposed to compliment girls on their clothes and that he wouldn't be much of a man if he couldn't offer one or two when his adorable girlfriend had done her very best to pick out a swimsuit. Mahiru exhaled in relief.

But it was easy to tell from the way she was blushing that Mahiru must have also felt embarrassed from being exposed more than usual.

Amane thought that if she was so self-conscious, she ought to have picked a suit with a little more coverage, like maybe a one-piece. But he figured that her choice had been influenced by Chitose, who was probably mostly to blame.

Even so…

Glancing around, there were a surprising number of men staring at Mahiru in her swimsuit.

Even men who were with other women were looking at her, completely engrossed, and some of them were even getting slapped by women whom he assumed were their girlfriends.

That was proof that just by standing there, Mahiru had become the angel of the waterside. But as her boyfriend, Amane wasn't having much fun. It was uncomfortable seeing people ogle his girlfriend in her swimsuit.

"Of course, it looks great on you, but—"

"But?"

"…It's no good."

Amane took off his hooded rash guard and draped it over Mahiru's shoulders.

Since she was so petite, the hem hung down to her thighs, so he figured it was sufficient protection from wandering eyes.

Of course, the beauty of her slender legs would probably still draw attention, but he couldn't cover everything, so there was nothing to be done.

"Put that on."

"But…what about you?"

"…What if I told you that I don't really want other guys to look at you?"

That was how he really felt. He completely understood why Mahiru attracted so many eyes, since he also appreciated her ample feminine figure, but the truth was that he didn't like it.

When he whispered his feelings into her ear, Mahiru's cheeks turned so red it looked like she was sunburned, and she answered quietly, "O-okay…"

He quickly zipped up the front of the rash guard and heard disappointed sighs from all around them. Relieved that he had protected his girlfriend from the wicked, wandering eyes of other men, Amane rolled up one of the loose sleeves until he could grasp Mahiru's hand.

"Come on, let's go."

"Okay."

Mahiru nodded weakly and squeezed his hand back, and Amane started walking slowly.

Since they were by the water, he had intended to take her hand when they were strolling in any case, to keep her from slipping, but now it also served as a major deterrent to other guys.

Walking by Mahiru's side as imposingly as he could, Amane was headed for the shallow pool, when Mahiru looked up at him and whispered, "…Amane-kun?"

"Hmm?"

"…If we were alone, would you have looked at me in my swimsuit for a long time?"

"If we were alone, I would have gotten my fill of looking, and I probably would have found the courage to touch you, too." Deliberately exaggerating to make fun of himself, Amane added, "Though, of course, all that staring and touching would be risky, so I'd have to try hard to restrain myself."

Mahiru looked worried for some reason.

After seeming to worry about it for a full ten seconds, Mahiru, still holding his hand, closed the distance between them even more. To be more precise, she glued herself to his arm. The soft feeling that reached him through the rash guard made it Amane's turn to blush.

"Mahiru, you bumped into me."

"…In this case, I think it's more accurate to say that I'm touching you."

“The angel part of you isn’t doing her job.”

“When girls are with someone they like, they can become angels or devils.”

Apparently, Mahiru was a devil today.

Despite that, she was shaking terribly with embarrassment and her face was bright red. But she didn’t seem inclined to let go of him and purposely pressed her chest into Amane’s arm, right above his elbow, so that he could scarcely bend the limb without burying it right between her breasts.

“…I don’t really mind you staying close, but you should know that I’m enjoying it.”

“Th-that’s a wild thing for you to say, but…I don’t mind.”

“…You dummy.”

Amane hadn’t expected her to approve. He groaned in spite of himself and, contrary to his word, tried desperately to distract himself from the soft sensation pressing against his arm by mentally reciting the digits of pi that he had been forced to memorize years earlier.

Hand in hand with Mahiru, who still drew plenty of looks, Amane arrived at a comparatively shallow pool and, swinging the small waterproof bag that he had in hand, looked at Mahiru by his side.

“So what’s the plan?”

“The plan?”

“I mean, the pools in this water park aren’t really meant for swimming lessons. Besides, you wouldn’t know what to do if I suddenly suggested you start swimming, would you?”

“That’s true, but…”

Amane was a fairly good swimmer, so he was fully capable of teaching her, but they weren’t at a pool with separate lanes that they could use for swimming class, so they were sure to run into other people.

The pools in the park were mostly meant for people to play in the water rather than do any serious swimming. Those who really wanted to would surely take lessons.

“If you want to learn, that’s fine, but as far as I’m concerned… Well, since we came all the way here, I just want to have a good time with you.”

“Th-that’s—um, me too. I’m happy just being here with you, Amane-kun.” Mahiru turned her eyes up at him and pressed herself close again. He was beginning to appreciate how charming she could be while acting devilish.

To recover his composure, Amane patted his adorable girlfriend on the head.

“All right, let’s hang out and relax together. Besides, if we were going to properly swim, you would have to take off that rash guard.”

Mahiru’s slim yet voluptuous body was hidden by Amane’s rash guard, but the shirt would get in the way if they started swimming, and she would probably need to remove it.

If Mahiru did that, all the guys around them would probably look at her, and Amane wouldn’t be able to take his eyes off her, either.

As her boyfriend, he felt like he didn’t have to feel guilty about checking her out in a swimsuit, but he worried that staring at her beauty for too long would give him a heart attack. The area under her bikini top was especially dangerous to look at.

“…Do you plan to keep me hidden forever?”

“No… Well, it seems wrong to show you off…”

“…Don’t you want to look?”

“I mean, I do, but I have zero doubt that I’d die.”

“Why would you die…?”

Mahiru sounded exasperated. Amane figured there was no way that she could understand how he felt. As a man, he wanted to look at her, of course, but he didn’t know if he could take it. The stress would kill him, socially and spiritually.

“…Well, you almost died when you saw my naked chest, didn’t you?”

“Th-that’s um—”

“By the way, it seemed like you were going to have trouble looking at other guys’ chests, but you appear to be handling it okay today, huh?”

Given Mahiru’s naïveté, Amane had been certain she would feel awkward seeing other men in their bathing suits, but so far, though she had been blushing at Amane’s words and actions, she didn’t seem outwardly embarrassed by any of them.

When he made that observation, Mahiru drew her shoulders together bashfully.

“Um. I’m not interested in anyone but you, Amane-kun… I’m not looking.”

“…Ah—”

“A-actually, my heart was pounding again today when I saw you in your swimsuit, you know? Compared to before, you’re really…lean—and more fit. S-sexy is what I mean.”

Mahiru glanced up briefly at Amane, then her eyes darted around nervously.

The first time Mahiru had seen Amane’s body must have been when she was nursing him through that cold a long time back. Certainly, compared to back then, everything about him had changed, from the way he led his life to his perception of himself. Back then, he had never even considered trying to change his string bean body.

...I guess the results have been pretty good?

He knew he couldn't compare to anyone who seriously went to the gym for bodybuilding, but Amane liked to think that, for a high school student, he had done pretty well so far.

"I mean, Amane-kun, you're attracting attention, too, you know? You're not too skinny, and you look really good—firm but flexible."

"Thanks for saying so… It feels a little funny when you compliment me, but it's kind of nice."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Like, to think that you were looking so closely, when you always acted innocent before…"

"A-are you making fun of me? I mean, I want to get a good look at the person I love."

As she said that, Mahiru looked directly at Amane's chest, but her eyes immediately started darting around, which was more like her.

She seemed to notice his little smile. Her cheeks flushed again, and she opened her eyes wide.

"Y-you can't talk anyway, Amane-kun! Your heart's pounding!"

Mahiru desperately slapped her hand down on Amane's chest to feel his heartbeat, and there was no way he could really hide it, so he nodded obediently.

Amane thought that any guy whose heart didn't pound the first time they saw their girlfriend in a bikini wasn't a man at all, so this was an entirely normal reaction. In fact, he would have appreciated a little recognition for his self-control.

"…It would be crazy to think that my heart wouldn't be pounding at the sight of the girl I love in her swimsuit, right?"

"Th-that's true, but in that case, surely it's all right for mine to be beating this fast, too?"

"Sure. I'm happy to know that."

That alone was evidence that she thought of him as her boyfriend, which made Amane embarrassed and glad. But he also felt like he was going to melt and wished she would tone it down.

To Amane, who had calmly reassured her, Mahiru kept moving her mouth like she wanted to say something to him. But then she seemed to give up and pressed her lips tightly shut as she flattened herself against his arm. She seemed to realize that words weren't going to do the trick and tried to win against Amane with brute force, so he pressed his lips together, too, but this time he let her do as she pleased without showing her the agitation she was hoping for.

"You didn't catch me off guard, so it won't work this time."

"…He says, as his heart pounds even harder than before."

"Shut up."

Amane turned away, betrayed by his own heartbeat, and Mahiru let out a cheerful laugh and rested her cheek against his shoulder.

Chapter 11

Poolside Playboys Are Expected

Eventually, a thoroughly shaken Amane was able to regain his composure, and he set foot into the pool with Mahiru by his side.

For Amane, who was already at adult height, the water came up to about his hips, but for Mahiru it reached her solar plexus, which didn't make it seem particularly shallow. She looked up at Amane with a slightly worried expression.

"…Mahiru, you're not gonna drown; you'll be fine."

"Amane-kun, people can die by drowning in as little as thirty centimeters of water."

"Okay, listen… I won't let that happen, but if by some chance you do, I'll give you CPR."

In order to encourage her, he spoke cheerfully, but Mahiru kept clinging to Amane's arm and looked up at him again. In her eyes, he saw a little bit of sulking and a shade of expectation.

"…You won't keep me from drowning?"

Without meaning to, his gaze locked on Mahiru after she murmured this with a tone of slight disappointment.

The small bulge formed by her pouting lips looked dissatisfied and…kind of pleading, but he figured that was his imagination.

Looking at her light-pink lips, which hadn't lost any of their luster even though she wasn't wearing lip balm, Amane gulped audibly. But there was no way he could cast away all reason and kiss her then and there, so he shifted his gaze to the side.

"…I-I'd like for us to wait a little bit longer, so…um, we can't, not here."

"I—I never said that I want you to do it here. But, well… I'm starting to wonder if you don't want to, Amane-kun."

"Of course I don't not w-want to!! I always want to!"

Surely there wasn't a guy in the world who didn't want to kiss the girl he liked. Even Amane, who was not a particularly romantic person, still wanted to touch Mahiru a lot and kiss her as much as he pleased.

He knew they had to work up to it step by step, and he was confident that she would pull away if he was always forcing his desires on her, so he had been holding back, but it was unthinkable that he didn't want to.

At Amane's strong assertion, Mahiru once again flushed red, pressed her forehead against his arm, and hid her face.

The fact that she was red all the way to her ears made Amane think that he had said something wrong, and he began to blush as well.

"…Y-you've got the wrong idea—"

"…Do I?"

"Well, it's not wrong exactly, but, um… If we do that, I'll have a hard time today, so please just wait a little longer."

Amane had often been ridiculed by Itsuki for being a late bloomer and a wuss, and at this point, he couldn't deny it.

From Mahiru's perspective, she was probably getting really impatient with Amane. He was treasuring her too much and moving at a slow pace, and she had been waiting for him the whole time.

...I guess Mahiru wants to go further?

She must want to do more things that lovers do?

He looked down at Mahiru to confirm his thoughts, and she had her eyes turned up at him with half of her flushed face still hidden.

"…You do what you like, Amane-kun. But Chitose-san said that making yourself hold back too long isn't good… Don't overdo it…"

"Ugh, Chitoseee—"

"A-after all, Chitose-san has been in a relationship longer than either of us, so…"

"She's definitely been a bad influence on you, don't you see?! L-listen, Mahiru, we can go at whatever pace feels right for us. I'm not trying to go unreasonably fast, and, um…if we rush too much, I think you'll end up floundering, too."

He believed she also wanted to move things forward, but he was worried that if they hurried things, Mahiru would feel like she was under too much pressure, so Amane thought a slow pace was best.

Amane wanted to proceed slowly for his own sake, too, since he didn't know what he might do if he let himself get carried away.

When he appealed to her with earnest eyes, Mahiru looked down, making an embarrassed face, and pressed her forehead against his arm once more.

"O-okay. Um… Sh-should we go swimming?"

"Y-yeah, we should…"

"…This is my first time coming to a place like this, so please tell me about everything."

She added quietly that she had rarely gone places with other people, so Amane took her hand, and they walked to the middle of the shallow pool.

He guessed that her family had probably never taken her to any kind of amusement park before, and he felt sad for her. He decided they should go experience one of those together sometime.

"So over summer break, how about we check off all of your 'firsts,' Mahiru?"

"…P-putting it that way is embarrassing, but…okay."

Mahiru flushed red but smiled happily. Amane beamed back at her and pulled her along by the hand to a spot that seemed to have slightly fewer people.

Mahiru had been anxious about potential drownings, but perhaps because she was with Amane, she didn't seem worried as long as they were just playing in the water.

When Amane rented an inner tube and handed it to Mahiru, she grumbled about it with a slightly peeved expression. "I feel like I'm being treated like a child…" Yet maybe because it gave her a sense of safety, she put the ring around her body.

While holding on to the tube, Mahiru relaxed and floated on top of the water, gazing up at Amane with a placid look.

Amane was standing by the side watching her, just in case, but the way things were going, he figured she wouldn't have any trouble enjoying herself.

"This feels great, doesn't it?" Mahiru smiled, bobbing around in her ring by Amane's side.

"Sure does," Amane leaned against the edge of the inner tube and nodded.

Amane liked swimming but had never particularly cared for playing around in the shallow pools. But being able to spend a relaxing time with Mahiru was not a bad thing. If they had been with Chitose and Itsuki, the two of them would have wanted to play with a beach ball or go down the waterslides or something.

That kind of stuff wasn't bad, either, but Amane liked having some relaxing alone time with Mahiru.

"With the ring, you won't drown, and you can enjoy the water as much as you like."

"…But it's awfully humiliating, using one at this age."

"Even adult women use them all the time. Look, there are people sitting in inner tubes over there, too."

Amane pointed to where some women in swimsuits were floating with their backsides down in the holes of their rings.

Rather than using them as swimming aids, most of the adults were chilling in similar positions.

Mahiru, who had stuck her body through the ring, looked in the direction Amane was indicating, then excitedly stood back up for a second and sat down into the ring.

Floating there with her body fully supported by the inner tube, Mahiru blinked several times, then smiled, looking mighty pleased with herself. She seemed to like it.

Her bare, milk-white legs, sticking out of the bottom of Amane's rash guard, kicked and splashed in the water.

Her legs were slender yet amply soft, and Amane got splashed in the face while he was captivated by their beauty.

Mahiru was giggling, wearing a happy, carefree smile.

Amane couldn't tell whether she had known where he was looking, or whether she had done that on purpose, but…for the time being, he splashed her lightly to get back at her, and Mahiru's smile widened.

"Now you've done it, hey!"

She had probably been trying to snap him out of his trance.

Mahiru launched another water attack against him, and Amane smiled a little and struck back.

But since Mahiru was rather immobile in the inner tube, she made for an easy target.

With the palm of his hand, Amane gently splashed some water onto Mahiru's chest, and she did the same back at him. She must have also been holding back as this attack only reached his chest.

Amane was fully soaked. The water still felt cool on his skin. He smiled with his whole face and splashed Mahiru some more.

He was going easy on her because Mahiru seemed liable to flip over if he overdid it, but she was cheerfully kicking the water in a stroking motion, splashing away.

Each time she kicked, she was thrown a little off-balance.

"Mahiru, hey—"

It would have been awful if she tipped over with the inner tube, so Amane leaned against the ring to stabilize her, and Mahiru clung tightly to him.

She was still frightened of falling into the water.

"If you thrash around too much, you're going to fall over."

"Uh…sorry."

"I'm right here, so it's fine, but…"

"…If I wasn't with you, I wouldn't have been playing around so much," she whispered quietly.

Against his better judgment, Amane stared at Mahiru.

She wrapped her arms around his back, buried her face in his chest, and continued, "…But I am with you, and I'm having so much fun… The whole world is sparkling… Besides, I knew you would help me if I needed it."

"…I, um, I don't know what to say when you tell me cute things like that."

Amane's face automatically turned red at her whispered words of love.

It made him want to groan.

How can she be so cute in every way?!

...I really love this girl...

Of course, this wasn't a surprise, but Amane could feel his chest grow hot just from the affection she was directing his way. He felt overwhelmed with love.

If they had been at home, he would have stroked her hair and never let her go, but since they were in a public space, he knew he had to restrain himself.

And so after hugging her for a moment, he whispered, "…Once we get home, I'll show you how much I love you," and then he let her go. Even though Mahiru was soaked through with water, her face was as red as a boiled octopus.

"…That's all I've ever wanted," he heard her murmur.

Ultimately, it was Amane who ended up sinking. Holding back a groan, he closed his eyes and tried to think about something else.

Seeing Amane like that, Mahiru smiled with great satisfaction, her cheeks still red, and whispered, “I want to show you my love, too.”

Amane glared at her, wondering if she wasn’t already doing so, with the way she was acting, and she smiled at him again.

“I want a chance to be in control, too. Recently, you’ve completely outwitted me.”

“…No way, you came onto me so aggressively before we were dating. It’s still my turn.”

“We’re skipping over too many of my turns. I want to get the chance to embarrass you, too.”

“So that was your goal all along? …Argh.”

Amane knew that Mahiru would have loved to embarrass him whenever the opportunity presented itself, so he steadied himself, ready to turn the tables on her.

Mahiru often toyed with him, exposing his pathetic side, so in an attempt to gain the advantage for once, he made a show of brushing back some of the hair on the side of her head and planted a gentle kiss on her cheek.

She seemed to have confidence to spare, but Amane somehow swallowed the shame that welled up inside him and peered down at his adorable girlfriend, who was frozen in place with a bright-red face.

“…Still love me?”

“N-not cute…”

“Well, I’ve never been much of a charmer. Here, let’s go take a break, shall we? I’ll go buy us some drinks.”

When he ruffled her soaking-wet hair, Mahiru seemed to unfreeze. She mumbled sulkily, “I’ll have an orange juice,” and then she head-butted him.

It was obviously an attempt to hide her embarrassment, so Amane laughed quietly and patted her head again.

“So this is what happens when I take my eyes off you?”

When Amane returned from buying drinks, Mahiru was being hassled by two guys.

This is why I didn’t want her out of my sight. This is my fault, but—

Even though it was a weekday, there was still a long line at the food court, so it had taken him some time, and sure enough, two guys had come up to talk to Mahiru.

They were in public, so obviously the guys were less likely to force her to go with them or anything, but as her boyfriend, Amane was not amused. He didn't even want random people to talk to her.

Mahiru herself was not even attempting to hide her annoyance. Apparently strange men hitting on her didn't get an angelic smile. She had zipped the front of the rash guard all the way up and wasn't smiling, giving them no openings. Amane sighed softly.

…They can't even tell how much they're bothering her, so I doubt they're going to be able to pick up any girls, but…

To begin with, they should have been able to tell that a girl sitting alone, wearing a men's rash guard, who looked like she was waiting for someone, might already have a partner. If they hadn't been able to guess, that didn't speak well for their ability to pick up girls. And if they were able to but decided to try to pick her up anyway, then they were real jerks.

Amane was probably thinking such harsh thoughts because he was annoyed that it was his girlfriend they were hitting on.

Mahiru was sitting politely on the bench and probably hadn't been able to escape from the men because she didn't want to leave that spot until Amane came back. Deciding that he would apologize to her later for making her wait, he hurried over.

"Sorry for the wait."

The moment he spoke, holding their drinks in both hands, Mahiru's face lit up. It was obvious that they had been bothering her.

Mahiru's expression made her look like a completely different person, and the guys gaped at her as if they had been caught off guard. They turned to look at Amane.

The two exuded a subtle sense of superiority as they sized him up, probably because he hadn't dressed up that day—after all, he couldn't use styling wax when going to the pool, so he'd only brushed and combed his hair, and it didn't look as good.

"Sorry, but she's with me, so I'd appreciate it if you would leave us alone."

Amane was used to people looking down on him, so he wasn't bothered by their stares and smiled at them stiffly. The guys' smirks turned even nastier.

"She's with you? Seriously? What a bad match!"

"A sad sack like you, with a girl like this…? Unbelievable."

Sorry for being a sad sack!

Amane knew he was plain-looking; he wasn't going to argue that point. But as to whether he was a good or bad match for Mahiru, well, he figured that these guys had to be even less worthy of her. There was no way that the kind of gaudy guys who walked around making passes at girls would ever appeal to someone as elegant, beautiful, and ephemeral as Mahiru.

The whole situation was a headache, and when Amane was puzzling over how to argue with them without making them angry, Mahiru suddenly chuckled quietly, “Heh-heh.”

He looked at Mahiru, who had laughed out of nowhere, and she was elegantly holding her hand over her mouth, covering her smile.

“They’re right,” she said. “If I had to say whether you were sunny or gloomy, you’re a gloomy one.”

“Don’t laugh…”

“I know that my boyfriend isn’t very cheerful. He’s a quiet, calm person.”

Amane watched her attentively, unsure of what Mahiru was trying to say, as she looked directly at the other guys for the first time.

There was no kindness in her eyes. They seemed cold.

...I bet she’s angry.

Mahiru hated it when people made fun of Amane. So he expected her to show the guys how she felt. She seemed to despise them.

“And even if he is gloomy, what’s wrong with that?”

Mahiru’s words didn’t sound particularly angry.

But in a tone that said they didn’t really understand the problem, the would-be pickup artists responded with a dumbfounded, “Huh?”

“I love him, whether he’s sunny or gloomy, it doesn’t matter. I fell for the whole package—his personality, looks, and attitude. Whether he seems like a good match is irrelevant. My love for him isn’t such a flimsy thing that I would ever worry about such questions.”

Mahiru made this definitive assertion, then smiled sweetly at Amane.

He felt his chest grow hot as it was full of love and affection, a smile she never would have shown the other guys. Amane had never imagined anyone would tell him they loved him in such a bold way, and while it was a little embarrassing, the feelings of happiness came to him first.

“I hope that you boys meet wonderful girls someday who think of you in the same way.”

Mahiru beamed, but it wasn’t the sticky-sweet smile like gooey honey and chocolate mixed together that she always used toward Amane. Mahiru finished them off with the perfect angelic smile that she used in public, and the guys stared at her, flabbergasted. Their faces were red, like they’d been scalded by Mahiru’s radiant smile. Amane briefly thought that if she had shown them her real face, the one that she only showed him, they would have been reduced to ash.

“Ah, well, um…”

Stammering, one of the guys tried to reach a hand out toward Mahiru.

"Hey, guys, over there."

Amane casually brushed the outstretched hand away and pointed past them.

The guys turned to look where Amane was pointing and saw that there was a man in a lookout tower who was watching them.

The pool management took safety very seriously, so there were lookout towers all over the place. The people posted there were to caution patrons against roughhousing near the water's edge and to keep anybody from drowning, but of course they were also monitoring whether there were any suspicious characters lurking about.

Once the two guys realized that the employee was looking at them, they ran off in a hurry with embarrassed expressions. Amane didn't feel bad for laughing at them for being cowards, despite having had the courage to chat up a girl out of their league who looked like she was already there with a guy.

It was finally just the two of them, so Amane sat down beside Mahiru.

"Sorry for taking so long."

He figured the first thing he needed to do was apologize.

After all, Mahiru had been placed in an uncomfortable situation because he had left her alone.

"No, it was busy, wasn't it? Plus, that happens all the time when I'm by myself."

"…I'm sure that's true, but it's my fault you were left alone. I bet you were scared."

"They seemed to understand what I was saying, so I wasn't afraid."

I doubt they were listening to you; I think they just left because other people started staring.

The exchange probably would have gone on a little longer if the pool employee hadn't been there. Amane would have gotten fed up with it halfway through and tried to take Mahiru's hand and leave, but whether the other guys would have let them go was a different matter.

Amane handed Mahiru the orange juice she had requested and drank some of his own soda through a straw.

"…You weren't scared?" he asked.

"No, more like upset that they ruined my good mood."

"Sorry. Cheer up, okay?"

"It wasn't your fault, but…all right, okay, let me have a sip of your drink, and it's a deal." Mahiru pointed to the soda Amane was drinking and smiled impishly.

"I can't say no to you." He smiled wryly and handed her his cup.

He could tell that she was acting deliberately playful so he wouldn't feel too guilty, and he recognized the thoughtful understanding behind her words.

Without saying anything more about what had just happened, Mahiru took the soda from Amane and sipped it…frowning with determination. Her eyes even filled with tears.

It was a strongly carbonated beverage, but not enough to cause such an intense reaction. Amane hadn't been bothered by it, but that didn't seem to be the case for Mahiru.

"Uh, did it taste weird?"

"…No, I just rarely have carbonated drinks… They really irritate the throat, don't they?"

Mahiru's eyes were watering from the strong sensation. Come to think of it, Mahiru only drank water, tea, coffee, and sometimes fruit juice. That was it; he had never seen her drinking a carbonated beverage before.

Mahiru wasn't that sensitive to spicy foods, but she didn't seem to care for this kind of bubbly sensation.

"I'm surprised you would want a sip of something like this; you never drink soda… So why did you want to try it?"

Seems like she could have anticipated this would happen.

He took his drink back from Mahiru and patted her head.

She looked up at him, eyes still watery from the fizziness. "…Because I wanted to enjoy the flavor with you, Amane-kun," she mumbled quietly.

Amane nearly dropped the soda, narrowly avoiding a disaster.

...My girlfriend is utterly adorable.

Amane wondered if "utterly" might sound disparaging, but he meant it as high praise. Also, he was in agony.

Even at the best of times, he found it hard to deal with how cute her appearance and mannerisms were, and when she said that she wanted to share the same drink, he had to stifle a groan.

Mahiru was too cute to even look at. Amane turned away, just holding on to Mahiru's hand, and she leaned against him, hooking her arm in his.

"…Me too. I want a sip of your orange juice later."

"Heh-heh, sure." Mahiru laughed faintly.

Without looking at her, he put his elbow up on the bench's armrest and faced the opposite direction.

That was probably why he didn't notice them getting closer.

“Hey, you over there, the cute little lady and the sad sack little boy, you wanna play with us?”

Someone called out to the two of them in a familiar, easygoing tone. Amane recognized it, but he hadn’t been expecting to hear it.

When Amane looked toward the voice, he saw exactly the faces he predicted:

A handsome, if shallow-looking, male and a boyish but beautiful girl. Both faces he saw frequently at school.

Amane shot them a suspicious look without really meaning to, but he didn’t feel bad about it.

“Why are you here, Itsuki?”

“I’m not stalking you, promise. It’s a coincidence, seriously,” Itsuki earnestly insisted. “You know I’m not *that* nosy.” He waved his hand dismissively.

Amane decided that their friends probably hadn’t been following them. For one thing, if they had been watching, Itsuki and Chitose would surely have come to Mahiru’s rescue when she was getting hit on.

He figured that, in terms of timing, they had probably spotted Mahiru after he’d rejoined her at the bench. It was also clear from Chitose’s expression that this was just a coincidence.

“I mean, we heard that you were going to the pool sometime this week, but of course I never expected to bump into you in such a big place, even if we showed up on the same day. Sorry for intruding on your lovey-dovey time.”

“…Hey—”

Amane wasn’t going to complain, since they had run into each other by chance, but he cast a sharp glance at Chitose, who had a big grin when she teased him.

Which is to say, he ended up glaring directly at her, since Chitose was also in her bathing suit, and it would have been rude to look at her body too much.

Chitose was wearing an orange top and swim shorts. When she noticed Amane staring at her, she smirked again and shouted, “Oh no, a pervert!” and wriggled around, even though it was obvious from the direction of his gaze that he wasn’t looking at her body.

Letting out a huge sigh at Chitose’s ridiculousness, Amane appealed to Itsuki with an imploring look, but Itsuki said, “It’s summer, so she’s got too much energy.” He didn’t seem inclined to try to stop her.

Feeling exasperated, Amane turned to Mahiru and saw that she had unzipped the front of the rash guard, which was previously zipped up to hide herself from the wannabe pickup artists. Even though it was a rash guard, she must have been hot with the fastener closed all the way up to her neck.

She had unfastened it down to her chest and was fanning a little air through the shirt.

Chitose blinked at her, “Hmm? Mahirun?”

“Yes?”

“…You wore that bikini?”

“This one?”

“Yeah, I mean, you got the other black string— *Mmph!*”

Chitose’s voice was muffled midway through her sentence by Mahiru forcibly covering up her mouth.

Mahiru had risen halfway to her feet to reach Chitose. She must have realized that Amane was staring at her, because she froze.

“…It’s nothing,” Mahiru said, shaking her head. Her cheeks were red.

“There was another swimsuit.”

“No, ah, that one, well… I’m embarrassed to wear that one in public, so…”

“You were about to spill out of it, huh? I thought it would be cute for you to wear when you and Amane were alone— *Mmph!*”

“Chitose-san, you need to shut up now.”

“O-okay!”

Mahiru covered Chitose’s mouth again. Chitose seemed absolutely remorseless.

Amane was surprised to hear Mahiru had purchased a swimsuit that she would be hesitant to wear in public, but once she said that it was for when they were alone together, his heart seemed like it would go crazy at the boldness of it all.

“…Is it really that risqué?”

“Not really. Mahirun has good taste; it’s just that it doesn’t cover much.”

“Chitose-san…”

“If I say any more, I think she’s really going to get pissed at me, so please understand you’ll just have to see it for yourself, Amane.”

“I-I’m not showing!”

Mahiru rejected the idea outright, her face as red as a ripe apple. Amane didn’t feel guilty about being a little disappointed.

Of course, if Mahiru was opposed to it, he wouldn’t tell her he wanted to see it no matter what, but still, it would be a lie if he said that he didn’t want to see his girlfriend like that.

From the way Chitose was talking, the other bathing suit wasn’t just revealing, it was a bold expression of Mahiru’s fine style.

At the moment, Amane was having a very hard time looking straight at her, but assuming that the other one revealed even more skin, Mahiru's refusal was probably his saving grace.

But of course, as a young man, he would have liked to see it.

Maybe he looked a little disappointed, because Chitose smirked, and Mahiru repeatedly glanced at him with uncertainty.

"You won't show him?" Chitose asked.

"…That's not up for discussion right now," Mahiru feebly responded. Then, as if to escape from Chitose's and Amane's gazes, she put up the hood on the rash guard and hung her head.

Even if Amane couldn't see her face, he could imagine that it was burning red, enough to make it look like she had gotten a sunburn.

"…Chitose, don't tease her too badly. And, Mahiru, you don't need to worry about what I think."

"But she's such a cutie!"

"Why say something so obvious?"

"Oh, this boy's a natural…"

Mahiru being cute was an indisputable fact, but when he agreed with her, Chitose looked at Amane with faint amazement in her eyes.

Before they started dating, Amane already knew from the beginning that Mahiru was cute, so it wasn't that surprising of a thing to say. But his friends seemed to be bewildered to hear him say it, and their eyes went wide.

"…Well, if you didn't wind up infatuated in the end, Amane… You used to say you would never get a girlfriend and never fall in love, but look at you now…"

"Shut up."

"You know, the feeling of being in love will change a person!"

"Will you two quit making fun of me? First of all, Mahiru being cute is a well-known fact, and anyway it's normal to think that your girlfriend is attractive. Itsuki, you're constantly bragging about how cute Chitose is."

Itsuki had been going on and on about his girlfriend ever since Amane had known him. Compared to that, Amane hadn't said much at all.

When Amane turned the tables and looked fed up with the two of them, insisting that it wasn't such a strange thing for him to feel that way about Mahiru, they shrugged defeatedly.

Amane glared at them, feeling slightly irritated by their attitude, but Itsuki just smiled wryly.

"Ah, but I think we'd better leave it there for now."

"What do you mean?"

"Shiina-san looks like she's having a hard time."

At Itsuki's mention of Mahiru, Amane looked over and saw she was holding the hood down over her head and trembling, probably feeling extremely self-conscious.

He knew she felt shy about being complimented too much in front of other people. She looked up at him, her eyes filled with tears of mortification.

"…That's a good and bad thing about you, Amane-kun," she mumbled, hiding deep within the hood.

Amane couldn't do anything but wait for Mahiru to pull herself together.

Once Mahiru recovered from her embarrassment, the four of them hung out together, which was great because it made it much harder for any other guys to approach Mahiru.

As long as the four of them moved as a group, no one would be left alone, and Amane was paying close attention to make sure it didn't happen again.

Moreover, since Itsuki was obviously outgoing and handsome, the Platonic ideal of a cheerful guy, and the type who had a friendly aura about him, any men who might have been aiming to pick up one of the girls probably thought better of it after one look at him.

However, since Chitose, Mahiru, and Itsuki were all extremely attractive, Amane couldn't help but feel like all eyes were on them.

"Mahirun, Mahirun, take this!"

"Kyah! …Geez, come on, Chitose-san!"

Without saying anything, Mahiru had pushed the group toward playing in the shallow pool.

Mahiru and Chitose were happily splashing each other, while Amane sat on the edge of the pool and watched them.

It was charming, watching two girls who were such good friends cheerfully playing around.

Also, they were both exceptionally beautiful in different ways, so watching them was a feast for the eyes.

"Man, it's so nice to see the girls getting along like that."

Itsuki was sitting beside Amane, watching them with a grin.

"You sound like a creepy old man," Amane replied.

"How rude! You're one to talk, ogling them while they play."

"I'm not that bad."

"But I bet you were thinking about how nice it was to watch, you taciturn guy."

"I could say the same about you."

“At least I’m honest about it,” Itsuki quipped, gazing idly at Mahiru, who was giggling as she splashed Chitose with water.

“So why were you watching her with that faraway look in your eyes?” Itsuki asked, wiping the foolish grin from his face. He leaned forward a little bit and peered at Amane.

“Well, how do I put this? Mahiru seems to have gotten even cuter than before.”

“Listen to you, going on about your girlfriend, too.”

“I’m not bragging; it’s just—she smiles a lot now. She didn’t used to smile this way at all.”

“We never saw her back then, but…do you mean she was cold?”

“Yeah. She was always cool and had a sharp tongue. It was because she didn’t trust anyone… I was thinking it’s nice to see her this way now.”

Compared to when they first met, Mahiru smiled much more openly now.

She had a carefree smile and honesty to her that seemed unrecognizable compared to the distant and sharp-tongued Mahiru of the past.

Amane felt proud that Mahiru had changed because of him, but it was also thanks to Chitose. Since they were both girls, they could talk about things together and understand each other.

Whenever he saw the two of them having fun together, as they were just then, he felt really happy.

“I agree; I’ve also been thinking that Shiina-san has changed a lot. She used to be like some kind of statue, and hard to approach, but now all I can see is a supercute girl who loves Amane.”

“Who loves me…? Listen—”

“I mean, it’s easy to tell, with that much pure affection directed your way. Even on a normal day, it’s obvious that she treats you special.”

“…By the way, I want to ask, from what you could see, has Mahiru been interested in me for a really long time?”

“If anything, she was brimming over with love, wondering what was taking you so long.”

“Seriously?”

He’d had a vague inkling that she liked him since before they started dating, but apparently Itsuki had seen it even before Amane had considered the possibility.

“I think that Shiina-san probably started to change around the time she started to trust you and like you,” Itsuki said.

“I wonder…?”

“And having Chi around maybe helped, too. She’s excitable and friendly, for better or worse, so she pulled Shiina-san out of her shell.”

“…I’m begging you to get your girlfriend under control.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Chi never treads where she really can’t go. Besides, look, they’re smiling so much.”

When Amane looked over to where Itsuki was pointing again, Chitose was hanging onto Mahiru, who looked embarrassed yet accepting of her own shyness.

He could tell from the look in her eyes and her soft expression that Mahiru trusted Chitose as well. It was good that she was finding more friends to depend on.

But he wanted to be the person she relied on the most.

Itsuki patted Amane on the back to tell him not to worry, and Amane responded with a wry smile.

“Hey, hey, you melancholy young men there standing by the poolside, come over here and play with us!” Chitose waved at them as she clung to Mahiru.

Mahiru waved her hand reservedly, too, looking like she wanted Amane to join them.

“When you get invited by a couple of cute girls, there’s no way you don’t answer their calls.” Itsuki plunged into the pool with a grin and headed toward the girls. Smiling, Amane watched him go, and he, too, took off toward Mahiru and the others.

“Whew, we really played a lot!”

After enjoying themselves for several hours, they were naturally a little tired, despite being high school students, and the four teenagers sat down on a bench to rest.

They had borrowed a ball to play volleyball, and at Chitose’s insistence, Mahiru had tried going down a small waterslide, which had been an exciting experience for her.

Sitting beside Amane, Mahiru looked refreshed but must have been fairly exhausted, because she was leaning lightly against him.

“That was fun, huh? It’s been a long time since I played like that,” she said.

“Mm, me too,” Amane agreed. “It’s been a while since I moved around that much.”

“Well, you didn’t participate any more than you had to at Sports Day, eh, Amane? I bet swimming was good exercise,” Itsuki remarked.

Amane wasn’t exactly unathletic, but sports still weren’t his strong suit, and he rarely got such a total workout. Even during gym, though he took the class seriously, he never worked his whole body into a good sweat.

“Partway, you went for a serious swim, didn’t you, Amane?”

“Well, a pool is a place for swimming, so…I think it’s nice to swim from time to time.”

“Mahirun was watching you while you swam, you know?” Chitose added.

“Ah, s-sorry, Mahiru.”

Mahiru had been playing happily with Chitose, so Amane had gone off to enjoy some light swimming, but he realized he might have made her wait around for him.

But Mahiru shook her head.

“Y-you don’t need to apologize, but…it must be nice.”

After a little thought, Amane figured out what she meant.

Mahiru didn’t know how to swim, so she must have been jealous of Amane, who could do so without any issues.

But he definitely wouldn’t out her in front of Chitose and Itsuki, so he just smiled softly and stroked her hair. If they had another opportunity, it would probably be good to practice swimming.

“Let’s go to the pool together again sometime,” Amane suggested.

“O-okay.”

“Huh, what’s that?” Chitose interrupted. “You say you want to see Mahirun’s black bikini?”

“You idiot, I definitely don’t want to suggest she wear that in public.”

“But you want to appreciate it when you’re alone?” Chitose prodded.

“That’s…different, since I’m her boyfriend, right?”

Thinking about Mahiru wearing a black bikini in front of everyone made Amane uncomfortable. Even though she wore his rash guard, he would have liked it if she had also put on swimming shorts.

“Come on, Mahirun, you’re not gonna show him?”

“I said we’ll talk about it later.”

Mahiru turned away uncooperatively. Amane smiled slightly and patted her head gently again.

The group left the water park together and went to a diner.

It was six o’clock, which was usually a little early for dinner, but they had been swimming, playing, and using up so much energy that they were hungry and figured it was the perfect time to eat.

Mahiru had never had the chance to go to a diner before and was a little nervous. She looked cute fidgeting, and Amane laughed in spite of himself. She slapped him from an angle that Chitose and Itsuki couldn’t see, and he reined it in.

“That reminds me—you’re going to Amane’s parents’ house over the summer break, right, Mahirun?” Chitose asked as she cut into her hamburger steak.

Mahiru had probably told her she was going with Amane to his family home so they could make plans together. Now, of course, Chitose was smirking at him.

“Oh yeah, that—you’re going there to introduce yourself, right?” Itsuki asked.

“Unfortunately, Mahiru has already met my parents.”

“Oh, that’s right… Well, at this point, it’s more like a wife accompanying her husband for his homecoming, huh?”

“Yeah, yeah, say whatever you like.”

The two of them weren’t even close to being married—or even engaged. So Amane’s first thought was to question what Itsuki was saying. But it was unusual for high schoolers in a relationship to go for such a long visit with each other’s parents, so there was at least something to his friend’s observation.

Amane quickly let the subject drop and took a bite of the rolled omelet from the Japanese set menu. Chitose didn’t crack a joke, but instead she looked at him with disappointment.

Ignoring her, he continued to eat, but somehow the eggs were unsatisfactory. They had a bland, flat taste, unlike Mahiru’s omelets, and though he didn’t complain, they left him feeling unsatisfied.

Convinced that Mahiru’s cooking was the best after all, Amane glanced over at her and saw she looked slightly embarrassed.

Apparently the talk of her being his wife made her shy.

“So you’re going to Amane’s house, huh…? His mom must be thrilled,” Itsuki remarked.

“You’re acquainted with Amane’s mother, Ikkun?”

“No, but I’ve heard about her… And from Amane’s stories, I’ve got a good picture of what she’s like.”

“My mom is a lot… Every time, it’s like she’s never met a stranger.”

It seemed like Itsuki had immediately been able to tell, just by hearing about her, that Amane’s mother had a lot in common with Chitose. If the two of them met, they would probably feel a sense of kinship.

“Huh, what’s that?”

“Mm, just talking about how cute you are, Chi.”

Itsuki casually dodged the question with a compliment, and Chitose looked delighted.

“Oh, you!” she fawned. “Ah, and by the way, Amane, let me know as soon as you’ve decided the dates for your trip home. I want to hang out with Mahirun before you go.”

“Sure thing. We’ll probably go in August, so you can have at it until then… Just don’t forget to do your homework.”

“Why do you sound like my mom?”

“I believe last year you made a big fuss about not being done with your homework, so…”

Chitose was the type to procrastinate and then panic, trying to get everything done before the end of the break.

On the other hand, Amane was the type to get it done early then review a little every day, while Itsuki liked to work slowly but steadily, so both of them had gotten stuck helping Chitose with her work before.

This year Amane had already finished his assignments, and Mahiru had as well, so they had been reviewing together.

“But I don’t wanna do it… Ah! Maybe this year I can get a sweet angel to teach me?”

“I don’t mind teaching you, but the next time you call me an angel, I’m rescinding the offer.”

“Ah, so strict! But I love stern Mahirun, too.”

Thinking how charming it was to see Mahiru sharing friendly banter with Chitose, Amane took another bite of his food before it got cold.

“Mahiru, tomorrow I’d like to eat omelets.”

She was sitting beside him, and when he told her this in a quiet voice, Mahiru’s gaze shifted to the tray in front of Amane.

“You’re eating one right now, aren’t you?”

“This one’s no good. Somehow the flavor is lacking. Yours are the best.”

“Heh-heh, you’re hopeless. All right, I’ll wake you up tomorrow with breakfast.”

“Mm.”

During summer vacation, Amane stopped getting up early, so he would be grateful for Mahiru if she did.

It would probably be bad for his heart to see her face first thing, but there could be no doubt that it would be an extraordinary way to start the day.

Amane was in a good mood, and as he looked forward to tomorrow’s breakfast, Itsuki stared at him in astonishment.

“You’re basically living together…”

“Shut up.”

Only half living together, but he didn't say that out loud and quietly sipped his slightly cooled miso soup.

Chapter 12

Homecoming, and Revealing the Relationship

"Did you lock all your doors and windows?"

"You watched me do it, didn't you?"

In the hallway in front of their apartments, Mahiru reminded Amane as if she was his teacher or something, and he answered with a small, wry smile.

Normally she wouldn't go out of her way to say something like that, but she seemed to be worried, since their places would be vacant for a while.

They were leaving that day to go back to Amane's family home for about two weeks, and Mahiru was making sure that nothing would happen while they were away.

"I did see you do it, but I'm asking just in case."

"Okay, okay. My turn—you didn't forget anything, did you?"

"I didn't. We already sent everything we needed ahead of time, and I checked my handbag again early this morning. Everything is locked up tight, and I took out the garbage from your place, and then I went over the contents of the fridge, so you can rest easy."

"Thanks for going to all that trouble."

Naturally, there was no way they could carry everything they needed for two weeks with them, so she had employed a parcel service so nothing would go overlooked. On top of that, Mahiru had taken care of everything at Amane's apartment. He was no match for her.

Feeling grateful that she paid attention to such details, Amane took Mahiru's bag from her and replaced it with his hand.

After blinking several times, Mahiru said quietly and bashfully, "That's one thing I like about you, Amane-kun," and squeezed his hand.

Amane's family home was located a little more than an hour's distance away by bullet train from where he and Mahiru lived in the city.

The two of them sat down in their reserved seats and amused themselves by chatting and enjoying the scenery, and in no time the train was pulling into Amane's hometown.

It had been about a year since he had seen that station, but it felt longer, and an inexpressible wave of nostalgia came over him as he pulled Mahiru along by the hand to the rendezvous spot.

"So this is your hometown."

"Mm-hmm. Well, that's not exactly right, since you can't get to my house without changing trains or going a little farther by car."

The bullet train only stopped at major stations, so they'd had to get off here, but it would actually take a little more time to get to where they were going.

This time, his mother had been available, so she had offered to come meet them, and they had taken her up on it. Her offer was probably motivated by the desire to see Mahiru as soon as possible.

Walking toward the large pillar near the ticket gates that was often used as a meetup spot, Amane spotted his mother, even at a distance.

Naturally, Amane felt awkward about holding hands in front of his mother, so he let go of Mahiru's hand. He sensed a slight air of dejection coming from her, so he patted her back lightly.

Forgive me just this once, since we haven't told her we're dating yet.

It had become routine for them to hold hands, so he was likely to take her hand without thinking about it, which he would need to be more careful of while they were visiting.

Even Mahiru, who was a little reluctant to let go, seemed to understand once she spotted Shihoko and regained her usual expression.

Once Amane's mother saw the two of them, she put on a charming, cheerful smile as they approached.

"So nice to see you again."

"Welcome, welcome, Mahiru-chan! I'm so glad that you came!"

Amane smiled wryly, thinking it was just like his mother to greet Mahiru first.

Mahiru seemed a little overwhelmed by Shihoko's energy, but she gracefully bowed with a smile. "Thank you very much for inviting me. And thank you for allowing me to join you during your precious family time…"

"Never mind all that; we wanted to see you, Mahiru-chan! Actually, we wanted to see you over spring break, too, but it didn't work out… Oh, Amane, what's wrong?"

"You're not going to greet your son?"

"Oh dear. Welcome home, Amane. Thank you for bringing Mahiru-chan."

"Yeah, sure."

He knew his mother was only teasing him, so he wasn't particularly upset by it. When she noticed how brusque he was, she pressed him further. "Oh, quit sulking, dear. Of course I'm happy you've come back to visit, Amane!"

He couldn't help but be irritated by the way she smirked at him.

Brushing off his mother's hand with a huff, Amane looked around. He was surprised his father hadn't come to meet them as well. Amane was sure he also had the day off from work and had thought that both of them were coming.

"Where's Dad?"

"Your father's at home now fixing lunch."

"Got it."

That made sense once she said it.

His father liked cooking and enjoyed hosting guests, so he was getting everything ready at home.

"We're in luck, Mahiru; Dad's cooking is great," he told her, swallowing his opinion that it wasn't as good as Mahiru's, though.

Mahiru giggled softly. "So I've heard. I'm looking forward to it."

"Oh-hoh-hoh. Please, come enjoy the tastes of our homemade food."

"Look who's talking; it's not like you're the one doing the cooking… Well, Dad is better at it anyway, so that's fine."

"Really, that was uncalled for."

Shihoko puffed out her cheeks in an immature expression. But it was a fact that Shuuto was the better cook.

Amane's mother made the meals on weekdays while his father cooked on the weekends, so even though Shihoko had more chances to practice, his father's cooking always tasted much better. That wasn't to say that Shihoko was an especially bad cook, just that when it came to the issue of seasoning, Shuuto's food was tastier. Of course, Amane was grateful to them both for cooking.

"Well, that's fine; Amane being uncooperative is nothing new. More importantly, should we head home? If we leave now, I think we'll get there just in time for lunch. The car's this way; come on."

Shihoko beckoned them toward the exit, saying the train station was no place to be having a long conversation.

Amane looked at Mahiru for a moment.

"Ready to go?"

"Yes."

Mahiru gave a little nod, and he squeezed her wrist gently.

Naturally, he couldn't entwine his fingers with hers, but by holding her wrist, he could play it off as making sure she didn't get lost.

Mahiru opened her eyes wide, then leaned in a little bit closer to him, wearing a happy but slightly bashful smile, and Amane started walking slowly behind his mother, also feeling a little shy.

They rode in the car for thirty minutes, bringing Amane and Mahiru's travel time to about two hours, before they arrived at the Fujimiya household.

A fairly large, detached house stood before their eyes. It was a spacious home with a den, a big kitchen, and spare rooms, and it must have been bigger than Mahiru was expecting, because her eyes widened.

"It's huge!"

"Oh, thank you. We built it to have extra space. We really wanted a daughter, too, so we included extra rooms, but we can't get everything we want in life, can we? …You can come live with us if you like!"

"Ah, um, I—"

"Mom, don't tease Mahiru; she doesn't know how to answer."

"My, my."

His mother smiled brightly, but it seemed like she was grinning at Mahiru's reaction.

Mahiru cast her eyes down in embarrassment, which he knew would only feed his mother's happy delusions. As for Amane's feelings on the matter, he hoped they would one day be more than just fantasies, but of course he couldn't tell his mother that.

"Come on, it's hot out here; let's hurry up and get inside."

"Yes, yes, you're no fun."

"What's that supposed to mean…?"

Amane herded his mother toward the house. He could tell that it was hopeless. She was grinning with delight as she unlocked the front door.

They heard footsteps from the interior. Amane's father had noticed their arrival.

"Welcome home."

When they stepped inside the house, as expected, Shuuto was waiting for them.

"I'm home, Shuuto-san. And I brought Mahiru-chan!"

"It's nice to see you again, Shiina-san."

"It's been a while; I'm glad to see you're doing well."

It had been about half a year since Mahiru had last met Amane's father, and as expected, she seemed nervous. His mother acted frank, friendly, and too forward with

Mahiru, so they were probably on more familiar terms, but he figured Mahiru still felt distant with his father.

Amane's father noticed Mahiru's slightly stiff demeanor, and he put on an amiable smile. "Oh, you don't have to be formal around an old man like me," he said.

"Oh no, I wasn't…"

"The problem is that you don't look like an old man, Dad."

"Oh, what a nice thing to say!"

It was true, Amane's father looked much younger than his actual age. He had what they called a baby face. Nobody could have ever guessed he was in his late thirties the first time they met him.

"You're looking good yourself, Amane."

"Have I changed that much in just six months?"

"Mm-hmm. You look more manly—or like you've gained some confidence. And you're filling out well."

Since he was traveling with Mahiru that day, Amane had dressed up. But his father must have meant that Amane had never been very confident in the past, and now that he was, it made a big impression.

Amane felt slightly embarrassed that his dad could see through him like that. He pressed his lips together, and his father chuckled quietly.

"Well, Shihoko dear, can I leave it up to you to show them around? I still have some refreshments to prepare."

"Sure! Come on in, kids. The house isn't much, but make yourself at home, Mahiru-chan."

"No, not at all… Thank you for your hospitality."

Mahiru bowed sincerely and took off her shoes before stepping up into the house. Amane also removed his and wore house slippers.

He didn't need a tour of his own childhood home, but Amane intended to go along and stand guard so his mother wouldn't tell Mahiru things he'd prefer she not know.

Shihoko watched Shuuto go back into the dining room, then beckoned the two of them toward the stairs. "This way!"

Most of the bedrooms and the guest room were on the second floor, so it seemed like she was going to show them that first.

Amane had planned to go to his own room and take a peek inside the bag he had shipped ahead, but he thought about it for a second and remembered where the guest room was. An uneasy expression crossed his face.

…When I looked last year, there was only one other room that hadn't been turned into storage space.

That room, with a balcony that connected to his, had apparently been built to use when his parents had another child. In the end, the family hadn't been blessed with another one, so it had gone unused, but the interior had been finished and set up so people could stay there.

They rarely visited anymore, but when Amane's cousins had come to spend long holidays with his family, that was the space they had used.

Not that he and Mahiru were going to do anything, but his stomach hurt a little as he wondered whether it was okay for members of the opposite sex to stay in rooms that were so directly connected.

"All right, Mahiru-chan, you can use this room."

Just as Amane had suspected, his mother led them into the room next to his, and he let out a soft sigh.

"Thank you so much for preparing a room for me."

"Don't mention it. The second-floor bathroom is over there, and the room next to you is Amane's. Sorry, but the balcony is connected."

Mahiru blinked in surprise when she heard that, then averted her eyes awkwardly.

"I'll make sure to lock my side of the balcony, and you can lock yours, too."

"I-I'm not worried about that."

"Just…please do it."

"Oh-hoh, how precious." His mother laughed. "Well, I'm going to help with lunch, so you two check your bags, okay? We've already carried yours up to your room, Mahiru-chan."

"Thank you so much."

"No problem. All right, see you in a bit."

Amane's mother smiled and went downstairs. He watched until he couldn't see her back anymore, then let out a huge sigh.

"Sorry, I think this was the only available room."

"N-no, it's fine!"

"It's fine because we're together, but if we weren't, it would be awful, right? But I don't think my mom knows about us… Geez."

"It's really okay. Besides, um… If the veranda connects, we can look at the stars together," Mahiru said quietly with a bashful look.

Amane smiled once he realized she wasn't worried about him visiting her in bed, and when she mentioned spending time together at night, happiness gradually welled up inside him.

"…Well, we can meet on the balcony later if we get a chance. Go ahead and get settled."

"Okay."

He wasn't sure whether Mahiru could tell that he was trying to hide his embarrassment, but she giggled happily and went into her assigned room.

It hit Amane again that they were going to spend two weeks together in the same space, and he covered his face with his hands as he stepped into his own room.

Lunch was like a welcome reception for Mahiru, and Amane's father treated them to some of his home cooking.

Shuuto was the type of person who, like Mahiru, could make all sorts of food, and apparently on Shihoko's request, the day's main dish was paella.

Of course, there wasn't just paella; the table was also set with bisque and salads loaded with seafood.

Naturally, everything was delicious, and Mahiru was genuinely delighted. It seemed Shuuto had impressed her with his culinary talents.

"Our son's not giving you any trouble, is he?"

A few moments after they had finished eating, Shuuto began to talk to Mahiru.

Shihoko took care of cleanup, and they could hear her washing dishes in the kitchen.

Mahiru blinked at the question and immediately shook her head.

"Trouble…? No, nothing like that."

"You can be honest, if you feel like you're being forced to take care of him."

"…I've never disliked spending time with Amane-kun or considered it a burden. I always have a good time with him."

"Good to know."

Amane couldn't think of anything to say. His reply came out more clipped than he intended.

"Don't be shy, Amane; you ought to thank her for what she does."

"…I'm always grateful."

"Yes, I know."

Mahiru had picked up on him trying to hide his embarrassment, and she laughed in her clear and beautiful voice. That made him feel even more mortified, and in his vexation, he repeatedly pressed and unpressed his lips, which only made her giggle even more. It was hopeless.

He looked at Mahiru, ready to warn her that she would be sorry for this, but all he could see was her charming smile, and it was obvious that his words wouldn't do much good. Amane couldn't stand it any longer and turned away. Even his father began laughing at him.

“You just can’t be honest, can you? Really. That is one of the cute things about you, though, Amane.”

“Why would you call a guy cute? Are you making fun of me?”

“He’s right; you are cute.”

“Mahiru, we’re going to have to talk about that later.”

“Okay. Let’s talk later.”

She answered cheerfully, and Amane was at a loss for words. Mahiru was being more assertive than usual. He had been worried that she might be feeling nervous, but she seemed to have loosened up.

Simply by sharing this kind of exchange with Amane, she was showing how familiar they were.

Amane’s father watched their exchange with interest. Suddenly, he blinked dramatically, as if he had just remembered something important.

“Oh, right, Shiina-san, if you don’t mind, would you go shopping with me? Shihoko-san asked me to pick up a few things.”

“Why are you trying to take her with you?” Amane objected emphatically.

His father continued smiling calmly. “Relax, it’s not like I’m going to drag her all over town chatting and giggling like your mother, you know?”

“I know that, but—”

“Anyway, you can stay home and watch the house.”

“What, why?!”

“Well, because I’m going to tell her about old times, and it’ll be a nuisance if the centerpiece of the story is there.”

“Did you just call me a nuisance?!” Amane demanded.

“I did,” his father smoothly confirmed.

Amane was again at a loss for words.

His father looked at Mahiru. “So you don’t mind going on an errand with an old man?”

“No, not at all. It would be my pleasure,” Mahiru said.

“Great, I’ll be glad to have you accompany me.” He smiled broadly. “While we’re out, I want you to help me pick out a present for Shihoko-san.”

Mahiru looked bewildered. “P-present? Is today an anniversary or something…?”

“Dad often buys Mom gifts, even on days that aren’t anything special.”

Amane’s father was a ladies’ man who was extremely kind to women—and especially to his beloved wife. He frequently gave her gifts, even when there wasn’t any kind of occasion.

He said that he did it out of gratitude for the things she did every day, as proof of his love, and because he wanted to see her happy face. Amane had also accompanied his father on such shopping trips when he visited home.

His father had probably invited Mahiru so he could get suggestions from a female perspective. But his main goal was definitely to tell stories about Amane.

"…You're a lot like your father, Amane-kun."

"I don't do as much as he does, though."

"You found me stuffed animals and cute little things and bought them for me, didn't you?"

It was true he had bought gifts that he thought would make Mahiru happy or look good on her, but he gave her those things because of how he felt about her and as thanks for looking after him on a daily basis.

Maybe that did mean he was like his father, but he didn't think his efforts were as frequent.

"Well, I mean, you do help me out every day, so…"

"…Yeah, and that's my point?"

Mahiru seemed exasperated with Amane, who answered by making excuses, and yet she laughed with a joyful, humorous tone.

Amane's father also looked over at him with apparent amusement, so Amane stumbled to his feet and made for the kitchen where his mother was cleaning up the dishes, running away under the pretense of going to help her.

"Oh, Amane? Wouldn't you rather be talking with Mahiru-chan?" Shihoko asked.

"Mahiru's planning to head out with Dad soon to do some shopping."

Amane glanced back into the living room, where the two of them were smiling and getting ready to leave.

They were moving quickly. Amane's father obviously wanted to give Amane some space to cool off after he started sulking. He was sometimes intimidated by his father's ability to see right through to the inner workings of other people's minds.

"Ah, they're going shopping, are they? And I think your father has some things he wants to ask Mahiru-chan, so this is probably a good time."

"What is he planning to ask her…?"

"Just normal stuff, probably? It's not like I always know what Shuuto-san's thinking."

Amane's mother handed him the paella pan after she had washed it and put it on the burner to dry, so he obediently returned it to the shelf where the cookware was stored.

While he was doing that, Mahiru and his father departed. Amane gave a somewhat forlorn glance across the living room, in the direction of the door they'd left through, and

then went back to help his mother finish washing up, drying the clean dishes and putting them back on that same shelf.

It was work that he frequently helped Mahiru with, and Amane was proud of how skillfully he handled the task. His mother's eyes widened when she saw him.

"You've really mastered those movements, Amane."

"Thanks for noticing."

"I'm relieved to see that you're not just making Mahiru-chan do everything."

"What kind of worthless, awful guy did you think I was…?"

Of course, he wasn't the kind of shameless person who would make Mahiru do all the work.

He would feel guilty, first and foremost, if he left everything to her.

She handled the hard work of cooking for him, so Amane figured he should help where he could and be sensitive to her needs.

He looked pointedly at his mother, as if to say it was only reasonable that he would help.

Still looking impressed, she addressed him again, "…Say, Amane?"

"What is it?"

"How far have you gone with Mahiru-chan?"

"*Pff?!*" Amane sputtered. He had certainly not been expecting that question.

His mother calmly finished washing a plate.

Without thinking, he took the clean plate and wiped the water off it with a towel, but he couldn't hide his agitation and furrowed his brow.

"Why are you so nervous? You're obviously dating; I can feel it in the air. That's just like you—you can't hide anything."

Once she said that, he couldn't deny it.

The atmosphere between Amane and Mahiru had changed since their shrine visit at the start of the year. That was only natural, since they'd begun dating, but he had thought he was hiding it quite well from his parents.

Since his mother had seen right through him in the end, that effort had been meaningless.

"…Is that a bad thing?"

"No? Actually I was hoping that she would one day visit as our new daughter-in-law, so she's very welcome."

"…Really?"

"The way you were looking at each other, the air between you two was so charged, I thought for sure you had already gone all the way, though."

“Bah! No way!” Amane’s eyebrows shot up at her outrageous suspicion. “…Mom, you can’t say stuff like that in front of Mahiru.”

But his mother didn’t seem ashamed. “Of course I’m not going to say that to Mahiru-chan. But personally, I do want a daughter. I’m counting on you!”

Amane didn’t blame her, since he understood her feelings as a mother who wanted a daughter but hadn’t been blessed with one, so he just pursed his lips.

“…Just don’t put any pressure on her.”

“I know that. That’s why I’ve got to get you to keep her around.”

“Do you really think I would let go of something I truly want?”

In the past, he had thought that so long as Mahiru was happy, he didn’t care if he wasn’t her partner and had been prepared to let her go, but now he couldn’t say that.

Maybe he had become petty, which was probably true, but he could also say that his desire to cherish Mahiru and never give her up had only grown stronger. He wanted to make her happy—and make her fall for him so hard that she wouldn’t think about anyone else. He wanted to treasure her and keep her to himself.

He wasn’t going to let Mahiru slip between his fingers.

Shihoko was momentarily taken aback by Amane’s confident assertion, and then she chuckled cheerfully. “Ha-ha, you’re like your father in that regard, too, you know. He loves me just as much today as he did long ago.”

“I didn’t inherit Dad’s natural skill with the ladies, though.”

“I wonder? Shall we ask Mahiru-chan?”

“Hey, don’t you dare.”

If his mother asked something embarrassing like that, Mahiru would probably have a fit, so Amane had to do whatever it took to prevent that.

He glared at his mother to tell her to stop, but it didn’t seem to have any effect on her. Cheerfully, she said, “I can’t wait until Mahiru-chan gets back,” and Amane frowned again.

After several hours, Amane’s father and Mahiru returned when it was around time his mother said they should be getting started on dinner preparations.

Amane had fled his mother’s relentless teasing and headed up to his room to unpack his bags and kill some time with his school books. Mahiru came to see him right after she returned.

Amane had taken most of his furniture with him to his apartment, so there wasn’t much to look at in his room, and his mother cleaned it periodically, so he wasn’t embarrassed to show it to her. He invited her in casually, but she seemed a little restless.

He couldn't tell whether that was because they were alone together, or because they were in his room, or maybe because of her outing with his father. But at any rate, Mahiru didn't seem as if she would calm down soon, so he put a cushion on the floor and motioned for her to sit down.

"Welcome back, Mahiru. Are you tired?" Amane asked as he brought over barley tea for two and placed the cups on a small folding table. After blinking several times, Mahiru smiled.

"No, we were sitting the whole time we were traveling on the way here, so moving my body was just what I needed."

"I see… So the reason you're fidgeting so much is because of something you heard from my dad?"

Apparently he had hit the bull's-eye. Mahiru averted her eyes nervously, and Amane sighed.

He wasn't upset with Mahiru, but there were several things he would have liked to say to his father. However, there was no way to tell whether Shuuto would be vague and evasive, or turn around and make fun of him, so he wasn't going to say anything.

"Geez, my dad… What did he tell you?"

"It wasn't that big of a deal. He just asked how you were doing and told me you were cute when you were a kid, stuff like that."

"…What did you hear?"

As would be expected, Amane had only a vague recollection of things he did in childhood, and he wasn't even sure if there were things he would be embarrassed about.

Nevertheless, if his father had gone out of his way to tell Mahiru stories, that must have meant he had done something memorable. He had probably told her stuff that, from a parent's perspective, made for cute and funny anecdotes, but from Amane's standpoint, stories of failure from his childhood were embarrassing and no laughing matter.

He narrowed his eyes and looked to Mahiru for details, but she blatantly turned away.

"Th-that's, um… Well…"

"Why are you looking away?"

"The only thing I learned is that you're definitely cute."

Mahiru gave a reply that didn't answer anything, and Amane let out a dramatic sigh.

"Wh-what is it?"

"This is what happens to bad girls who won't answer seriously."

Mahiru had been sitting off to the side, and he pulled her toward him and made her sit between his legs. He embraced her from behind, wrapping himself around her, and touched Mahiru's belly.

She seemed surprised by this and twisted her body around to look up at Amane.

"Ah, um, Amane-kun?"

"You're pretty ticklish, right, Mahiru?"

"…W-wait, please! Let's talk about this!"

"If you had fessed up in the first place, it wouldn't have come to this."

He slowly moved his hands over her sides, following her body over her clothes, and he clearly felt her squirm.

Feeling her slim figure, he ran his fingers slowly over the smooth line of her waist and heard a small gasp.

Her reaction was so enticing that, against his better judgment, he wiggled his fingers, gently grazing her skin and tickling her again.

Seeing Mahiru squirm in his arms filled him with all sorts of problematic feelings, but it was too late to stop.

"Ha, hey, wait…hee-hee, Amane-kun…"

"Wow, you really are ticklish, Mahiru."

He only touched her very gently, but Mahiru was apparently very sensitive. She was clutching her knees to her chest, trembling, and letting out little gasps of air.

Amane wasn't sure whether to think it was cute or be shocked by how stubborn she was.

As he was tickling her softly, he made sure not to touch any risky places. Perhaps unable to stand it any longer, Mahiru suddenly turned her whole body around to face Amane.

She glared at him with slightly flushed cheeks and eyes teary from the tickling, and Amane's heart pounded for several reasons.

"A-Amane-kun, you dummy. That was mean."

"If you had told me everything right away, this never would have happened."

"W-we really didn't talk about anything important. He told me about when you had a head-on collision with a utility pole when you were little and cried a lot, and how you used to cling to your mom on Mother's Day and tell her you loved her in baby talk, and how you once put wax in your hair because you wanted to look cool like your dad and ended up with hard, spiky hair. That kind of stuff, that's all."

"Those are the worst kind of stories!"

When he learned that Mahiru had heard about such embarrassing incidents that he didn't even remember, Amane covered his face with his hands.

He had figured that his parents would tell her stories from his childhood, but he would have liked to know why they'd decided to only share the embarrassing ones.

From his parents' perspective, those were probably just charming anecdotes, but to Amane, they were part of a dark past.

"I—I thought they were cute?"

"Don't compliment me. Forget those stories."

"…I refuse, since you tickled me."

Amane knew that the stories would probably have been burned into her memories even if he hadn't done that, but when he heard the slightly peevish tone behind her words, he regretted that he might have pushed things too far and wrapped his arms gently around Mahiru from behind.

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry."

"…Next time you tickle me, I'm going to whisper all the stories I heard right into your ear, Amane-kun."

"Hold off on the psychological warfare… I get it, I get it. Sorry."

He hugged her and stroked her hair to calm her down, and Mahiru settled docilely into Amane's arms and buried her face in his collar.

"Mahiru-chan, go and have your bath."

They were sitting around after dinner, and it was getting about time for everyone to take a bath, when Shihoko turned to Mahiru, who was sitting beside Amane watching the television.

"I can go after…"

"You're our guest, so don't hold back, okay? If you don't want to get in alone, we'll lend you Amane for a bit."

"What a stupid thing to say, Mom." Amane's eyebrow furrowed when his mother made an outrageous suggestion with a broad grin.

When she said she would lend her son, she was suggesting Amane should get in the bathtub with Mahiru, something that Mahiru almost certainly would not consent to. Even though they had splashed around in their swimsuits the other day, getting fully nude together was still unthinkable.

Sure enough, Mahiru's face went bright red.

She glanced over at Amane, then flushed an even deeper shade. She had definitely imagined seeing his body and gotten even more embarrassed.

Amane knew he would also be writhing in shame if he imagined anything in detail, so he did everything in his power to not think too much.

"S-so we'd be, um, naked…"

“Oh, should I lay out an extra towel?”

“N-no, thank you…”

“Goodness, you don’t need to be so embarrassed! Shuuto-san and I bathe together all the time.”

“Th-that’s…”

“Mahiru, don’t take her too seriously. I mean, Mom and Dad do get in the bath together a lot, but we don’t have to do that.”

His mother had been joking around, but there was more to it. Amane’s parents were intimate with each other all the time. If they went out walking together, they invariably held hands and smiled at each other, and when it was time to sleep, they both shared a bed. They were that consistent.

No matter how you looked at it, the two of them were head over heels for each other, which was kind of embarrassing for their son. But around town, they were known as a couple of lovebirds. The two of them even took their baths together. They believed that spending lots of time with one another was important to maintaining a happy marriage. Shihoko may have only been teasing, or she may have honestly considered it their chance to get closer.

Either way, it’s none of her business.

Amane was quite likely to dye the bathwater red with a nosebleed if they got in together.

“You don’t want to…? What’s the matter with you young people?”

“Whether we want to or not, do you think I could stand to do that in my parents’ home?”

“But I heard you were considering it at your apartment.”

“…That’s not up for discussion right now.”

He had realized what a convenient phrase that was the other day at the pool when Mahiru had used it.

Amane could see that her eyes were darting around in embarrassment, but in his heart, he couldn’t say that he didn’t want to bathe together, so the best he could do was dodge the question.

Honestly, he knew it would be incredibly awkward and that the both of them would probably die of shame if they tried. But at the same time, as a teenage boy, he couldn’t help but want to do it, just a little. He didn’t think it would happen, though.

Amane’s father had been listening to the conversation with amusement. He looked at Amane’s stiff face and curled his lips upward in somewhat of a wry smile.

“Shihoko dear, don’t tease them too much.”

“All right, fine,” she relented.

Amane was immensely grateful for his father's intervention.

"Go on, ignore my mom and go have your bath."

"O-okay. I'm going, then."

"You're such a cold fish, Amane. Have a good soak, Mahiru-chan."

Amane showed Mahiru to the bathroom to prevent Shihoko from delaying her all night, then returned to the living room.

When Amane's father saw how exhausted he looked, he chuckled and gave him a sympathetic smile.

Once Mahiru finished her bath, Amane's turn was next.

Knowing that his parents were going to get in together and flirt happily in the tub, Amane had to take it before them.

He felt his heart beat as he passed by Mahiru on his way to the bathroom, and he quickly went to bathe.

He wasn't able to soak long because the thought that he was sitting in the same water Mahiru had used kept popping into his head, making him feel restless and dizzy.

Once Amane got out, his parents took their turn, so he was left alone in the living room with Mahiru.

"Th-they're very intimate," Mahiru mumbled almost unconsciously as she watched them go. Shuuto had his arm around Shihoko's waist.

"They've been like that for as long as I can remember. I'm used to it."

"…I think you have a great family."

"Thanks for saying so. Sometimes they give me heartburn, though."

"Heh-heh."

Amane rubbed his chest and stuck out his tongue, and Mahiru giggled quietly, covering her mouth.

"…Just asking, but are you going to be all right staying here? You're not worn out or anything?"

"I'm fine. The two of them are being so nice to me… Like, they're treating me as if I'm their real daughter…"

"Well, I guess it's because my parents always wanted one. Now that such a cute, nice girl has shown up, they probably want to dote on you."

"R-right."

Amane's parents had readily accepted Mahiru.

Of course, they were impressed with Mahiru's sweet personality. Shihoko was practically smitten—and keen to spend plenty of time with her.

Mahiru's cheeks were faintly red, maybe because she felt bashful from being called cute.

"If you like, I don't mind letting my parents pamper you. Ever since I left home, they have been starved for someone to spoil. If there's anything you want, or any place you want to go, just tell them, okay?"

His parents, especially his mother, seemed like they would grant any wish Mahiru had with big smiles on their faces.

"Y-you know I couldn't pester them like that… But—"

"But?"

"I—I would like it if we could all go out together… I've always wanted to go on a big family outing…"

At those final words, which she added in a truly fragile voice that was barely louder than a whisper, Amane felt a great pressure thumping in his chest.

He knew that Mahiru had a poor relationship with her own family. Amane figured that, for Mahiru, being able to develop a rapport with his parents allowed her to experience something she never had with her family. He hoped she would come to feel that way, but he knew it wasn't something he could force. So instead, he decided not to mention it—and just focused on treating Mahiru as if she was part of his family.

"Is that so? Well, I'll tell Mom. Although I'm warning you, if you don't have a particular place in mind, my mom will probably pick whatever she wants. Some amusement park or shopping mall, most likely. If there's somewhere you want to go, you should ask, otherwise she might take us to some weird places."

"Heh-heh, as long as I'm going with you and your parents, anywhere is fine."

"If you say that, my mom's going to take us someplace strange…"

Mahiru smiled happily at Amane's words, and Amane felt quietly relieved. Then he told her about some of the odd destinations they had gone to in the past and coaxed even more smiles out of her.

Chapter 13

Always by Your Side

Whether it was due to exhaustion from traveling or from dealing with his parents who were giving him a hard time, Amane woke up late the next morning—if it could even be called morning, since it was almost noon by the time he got out of bed.

Amane picked up his terrycloth blanket from where it had fallen onto the floor at some point in the night, and as he began folding it, he let out one big yawn.

...I don't think we have any plans for today.

There was Mahiru's request for the four of them to go on an outing together, but Amane hadn't told his parents about that yet, as he had been planning to stay at home for the first few days to rest. It was summer vacation, so he figured it was all right to get up close to noon, though he couldn't help feeling like he was being lazy.

Amane changed his clothes at a leisurely pace. Once he finished dressing and made it down to the living room, he saw that of course Mahiru had made it there before him. She was sitting at the table with his mother and father.

Mahiru was peering down at some large object that resembled a book, and what she saw was making her eyes sparkle.

"Good morning. Whatcha looking at?"

"Oh, good morning," Mahiru greeted him, without a shred of sleepiness to be found in her expression. Then she lowered her gaze to the book on the table again.

Amane looked down, too, curious as to what it could be, then covered his face with his hand.

"…Wait a minute, why are you looking at a photo album without me…?"

He saw a picture of a familiar, mud-caked little boy and groaned.

Amane's parents were the type to take commemorative photographs, and they treasured their memories, so it wasn't surprising that they kept photo albums. The problem was that they were showing one to Mahiru.

The pictures in the album, which was lying wide open, were of Amane when he was young. It was filled with photos of a charming and cherubic little boy, who was doing something embarrassing in most of them.

Amane felt annoyed as he glared at his mother, who had been showing Mahiru photographs of him covered in mud or on the verge of tears with obvious delight.

"Oh, did you want to see your cute photos, too? You should have said something earlier."

"No, I meant don't show her without my permission!"

"…Was it wrong of me to look?"

"It's not, but…it's just embarrassing."

"But you're so adorable."

"That's not considered a compliment for a guy, you know."

If she had called him cool or something, that would have been better, but *adorable* was not what he wanted to hear. Even though he knew she meant his childhood antics were cute, he wasn't happy about it.

Amane turned away in a huff and could practically feel all three of them smiling at him.

"Come on, it's fine, isn't it?" his mother prodded. "Mahiru-chan's clearly crazy about you!"

"I'm sure she just meant that the pictures were cute," he scoffed.

"O-only because of how different you are now."

"Shiina-san here must really like you, Amane. As your father, it makes me happy that you have such a levelheaded girl by your side."

Out of the corner of his eye, Amane could see Mahiru staring at the floor, hunched over. He figured that she must be embarrassed by his parents' praise. However, he was preoccupied with his own shame over the humiliating photos his parents had shown off without his permission.

He flopped down onto the sofa in protest, and both of his parents smiled at him.

"Don't pout," his father said. "Isn't it true that you have a great girl by your side who accepts you for who you are?"

"…That is true, but—"

"The one thing that makes us a little sad is that you didn't tell us, though."

"Uh—"

Apparently, Shuuto knew that he and Mahiru were dating. Maybe Shihoko had told him, or maybe he had heard it directly from Mahiru herself.

"…I know you were probably embarrassed to tell us everything, but—"

“Even so, we would have liked to know,” his mother interjected. “Although, we did guess.”

“Well, as soon as Amane said he was bringing a girl home, we knew, right? And you two are easy to read anyway.”

“Oh, shut up!” Amane exclaimed. “So we’re dating! Is that so bad?”

“My, my, you really can’t be honest about your feelings,” his mother scolded. “Are you sure you want a guy like this, Mahiru-chan?”

“Well, Amane-kun is a shy person…and I love him for it.”

“I see; well, there you have it.”

“I’m relieved you get along so well.”

Amane already felt exhausted as his parents gave Mahiru delighted looks, before turning their attention to him. He couldn’t even work up the spirit to respond.

…I’m in my own home, but I’m at a total disadvantage.

He knew how his parents were and had anticipated something like this happening, but it was still almost unbearable. They were being more welcoming and more familiar with Mahiru than with their own son, and it made him uncomfortable.

Amane sighed and, with a feeling of desperation, set the album on his knees and started flipping through it.

The photos that Mahiru had been looking at so happily were, as he expected, mostly records of embarrassing moments. Some had been taken to commemorate special occasions, but the majority showed him looking foolish.

He was disheartened to see that they also had pictures of him wearing girls’ clothes.

Amane had grown slowly, and until about halfway through middle school, he’d had a very cherubic face, so as a game, his mother had sometimes dressed him up in clothes for girls.

In his second year of middle school, he had gotten remarkably taller, and she hadn’t been able to do that anymore, but it was a bitter pill to swallow being called *girly face* behind his back.

…This brings back memories…

Amane couldn’t help but think of the boys who’d once been his close friends before they’d had their falling out. He had left his hometown specifically to get away from all that. Now, for better or worse, he cut himself off from his past. He had no intention of sinking in sentimentality. However, he did think that there was a chance he might run into those boys, since they had all gone to the local high school, and that if he did, it was unlikely to go well.

Amane slammed the album shut to cut off the stream of troublesome memories, and when he looked up, he saw Mahiru staring at him.

"Ah, um, are you angry…?" she asked. She sounded worried.

"Why would you think that? I was simply thinking that it was nostalgic, that's all." Amane shrugged and placed the album back on the table.

Amane was irritated by the way his parents had been treating him, but more than that, he couldn't stand seeing Mahiru upset. He gently extended a hand and patted her on the head. Mahiru's eyes opened wide for a moment but immediately softened as her face slackened into a pleasant smile.

Shihoko gave them an approving look, but Amane ignored her and gently stroked Mahiru's hair to soothe her uneasiness.

By the third day of their visit, Mahiru was thoroughly familiar with Amane's childhood home.

"Wow, Mahiru-chan, you're really good!"

The three of them—Amane's parents and Mahiru—were in the kitchen, wearing aprons, chummily making some kind of sweet. Amane was not participating. He hadn't even been invited, so all he could do was sit in the living room alone and watch his girlfriend and his parents from a distance.

Amane and Mahiru had traveled a long way to be there, so Amane's parents were entertaining Mahiru at every opportunity. They seemed to prefer her over their own son, and the three of them seemed to be having a grand old time together.

It wasn't that he didn't understand why his parents doted on his girlfriend, since she was such a cute, honest, and nice girl, but they were neglecting their only son.

He didn't particularly need them for anything, or want to be bothered, but he still had mixed feelings about being abandoned like that.

Of course, he was happy that Mahiru seemed to enjoy the attention from his parents. He didn't mind sitting out a bit if it meant that Mahiru, who had always yearned for a close family, got to experience one, even if it wasn't hers.

The one thing that bothered him a little was that while his parents were entertaining Mahiru, Amane hardly got to spend any time with her.

I guess it's fine since we'll be together when we get back.

He knew that, once they returned to their apartments, he would have plenty of time alone with Mahiru, but be that as it may, Amane still felt a bit conflicted.

For the time being, Mahiru and his parents were preoccupied with each other, so in order to escape his discomfort, Amane left the living room and went back to his bedroom.

He sat down cross-legged in front of a folding table and opened up a book he had brought.

He didn't have anything to do, and he had taken almost everything with him to his new place when he moved, so this was the only way he had to pass the time. In any case, they had tests coming up right after summer break, so he needed to study to maintain his rank, and he liked studying anyway, so it wasn't a pain.

Amane passed the time quietly, lost in his studies like a good student.

Even though the workbook was new, thanks to his daily efforts, he was able to solve the problems in it without much trouble. His parents had always told him to study hard, and more importantly, he had been working diligently to keep up with Mahiru, so now he was seeing the results of those efforts.

I'm sure it's lively down in the kitchen…, he thought absentmindedly as he checked his answers, drawing red circles on his paper. He had made a few careless mistakes but was relieved to see his answers were mostly correct.

Amane still felt uncomfortable, despite the stillness of his bedroom.

It's always been normal for me to spend time by myself. Since when have I felt like something is missing without someone by my side?

Without a doubt, it was because of Mahiru. He had gotten used to having her around, so he now felt weirdly incomplete when he was alone.

Idly spinning his red pen around and around in his hands, Amane let out a small sigh. He would finish the workbook soon, a thought that should have made him happy, but just as he was about to exchange his red pen for a mechanical pencil with a mournful grumble, the sound of three hard knocks sounded from the bedroom door.

"Amane-kun?" he heard Mahiru's reserved voice ask.

He had thought she was cooking down in the kitchen, but when he glanced at the clock, he saw that two hours had passed. They had probably finished already.

"What's up?"

"Nothing, just—you disappeared without us noticing, so…"

"I was only studying. I had some time, so…"

He could hardly believe that two hours had gone by, but that just showed how focused he had been. Actually, in a way, he had been more distracted than focused since he'd only started studying to drive other thoughts from his mind.

"…Is that so? Um, is it okay for me to come into your room?"

"It's fine, but wouldn't you rather be talking to my parents?"

"…Right now, I want to talk to you, Amane-kun."

She was probably concerned about him. If not, she wouldn't have bothered to come visit him in his room. He thought he was acting immature with his responses, but

there was no reason for him to turn her away, so he opened the door and said, “Come on in.”

On the other side stood Mahiru. She was holding a tray and looking at him timidly.

On the tray were two café au laits and two cream puffs, which was apparently what they had been making earlier.

“Pardon the intrusion…”

Mahiru entered hesitantly, making Amane feel a little awkward, too.

He hurriedly cleared away his workbook and writing implements, pulled out a cushion for Mahiru, then took the tray from her and set it down on the folding table.

The beautifully baked cream puffs were magnificent to behold, like something you would buy from a bakery. And since Mahiru had made them, Amane knew they would be delicious.

“We just finished making them. They’re not that chilled, but…”

“Mm, thanks.”

He was full of gratitude that she had gone to the trouble of bringing them up to him, so he said so honestly.

But for some reason, Mahiru cast her eyes downward uneasily.

“…Amane-kun, you’re not mad…are you?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“Th-the air around you feels prickly. Like it’s hard to get close to you.”

Apparently, she had picked up on the fact that he was upset, although he wasn’t actually mad, like she seemed to think. Amane’s feelings were very complicated, and he did feel lonely. But he wasn’t angry whatsoever. After all, there was nothing wrong with what his parents or Mahiru were doing, Amane was just in a funk all on his own.

“I’m really not mad at all. It’s just—I was feeling lonely because you got taken away,” he admitted.

“Ah…well, that’s…”

“Sorry. I know you’re having fun spending time with my mom and dad. I’m just being sulky. It’s childish, even for me.” He laughed and shrugged, then took a sip of the café au lait she had poured for him.

Amane knew that Mahiru was hungry for a loving family, and he felt bad about leaving her alone earlier. He should have been enjoying watching her, instead of worrying about feeling out of place.

Amane was happy as long as Mahiru was happy, but it felt sad to be left behind, and he was the one who had chosen to isolate himself further. He had selfishly worked himself into a bad mood, and he couldn’t blame that on Mahiru or his parents.

Amane set down his cup and sighed, and Mahiru slowly looked up at him—then quickly launched herself at his chest. To be more exact, she got close and leaned her body against his chest, but Amane was caught off guard by the sudden physical contact.

He wondered what was wrong all of a sudden, but for the moment, he gently patted Mahiru's back to comfort her. She slowly lifted her face and looked Amane directly in the eyes.

"…Of course I have fun spending time with your parents. It does make me happy, but I need you to know that my favorite thing is being with you, Amane-kun," she whispered, then brought her lips to his cheek nervously.

By the time he had registered the faint, soft pressure, Mahiru had already pulled away.

When he saw her cheeks, suddenly redder than they had been before, and her eyes welling with tears, Amane instinctively planted his own kiss on her soft cheek.

…I've been a fool.

He had been acting like a complete idiot, pouting for no reason, when Mahiru had been so concerned about him.

He realized again how much he loved her, and he tried to express his overflowing feelings with that action.

Even if it was just on the cheek, Amane wasn't used to kissing yet. Mahiru was the same and shivered when Amane's lips made contact.

At first, she seemed like she was going to run away out of shame, but as Amane held her tight and touched her gently, she gradually relaxed into his arms and closed her eyes in comfort.

Mahiru bashfully kissed Amane's cheek in return, and overcome by her cuteness, he squeezed her even tighter.

"…Hey, Mahiru?"

After they had kissed each other on the cheeks for a while, Amane peered down into Mahiru's eyes. She looked back up at him with an expression filled with both embarrassment and joy.

"Listen, tomorrow, let's go out together. My parents have work."

"Just the two of us?"

"I haven't shown you around my hometown yet, have I? Though, it's not like there's much to see, not like where we live."

He had only suggested it because he wanted to spend time with her, but Mahiru's eyes widened, then she put on an even softer smile than when they had been kissing.

"Let's go… I'll go anywhere, as long as I'm with you."

"Uh—"

"But today, I want to stay here like this for a little while longer… Your parents also told me I should spend some time with you."

"It's none of their business…is what I'd like to say, but they saw right through me. I guess I am bad at hiding my feelings."

It seemed Amane's parents had been worried about him as well.

Amane laughed at how needlessly foolish he had been as he slowly pulled away from Mahiru.

She looked hurt for a moment, but then Amane pointed at the cream puffs and whispered, "I want to eat the sweets that you made," and she immediately cast her eyes down bashfully.

"…Shall we eat them together?"

“Yes.”

Instead of embracing, Amane sat by Mahiru’s side, holding her hand and smiling warmly.

Chapter 14

A Chance Meeting with the Past

"The two of you are going out today, right?" Shihoko inquired as the four of them took their seats at the breakfast table.

Amane's parents looked very pleased, and Amane started to regret telling them that he and Mahiru had made plans.

But his mother didn't mean to tease them. "I'm sure you're bored being cooped up in the house," she added quickly.

"Well, we're not really going anywhere in particular," he replied, "just taking a little walk."

"We haven't gone anywhere yet, so I'm looking forward to it," Mahiru added.

In the three days since they had arrived, Mahiru had gone shopping with Amane's father on the first day, but aside from that, they had passed the time at the house. Amane's parents had been keeping Mahiru busy, and it wasn't like she was going to wander aimlessly in an unfamiliar neighborhood.

Amane had expected his parents to take them out to places, but instead they had chosen to relax at home, so he figured he would at least show Mahiru around town.

"There's really nothing around here except parks and a supermarket, you know? It's a different story if we go into town, though. Do you want to go?"

"No, taking a stroll with you sounds just fine. I'm happy just walking together."

"…Is that so?"

He knew the answer. Mahiru didn't have any particular place she wanted to visit—just going out and spending time with Amane was enough for her. Her affection gradually warmed Amane's chest. He could see by her expression that she really was happy being with him, and he found himself looking away out of embarrassment and joy.

“You know, they already seem like they’re more than just dating,” his father remarked.

“We were like that when we were young, too, Shuuto-san,” his mother replied.

“No, you weren’t as well-behaved as Shiina-san here.”

“Oh, that’s not nice!”

“But I thought you were cute just the way you were.”

“Well!”

Shihoko blushed as Shuuto complimented her. Thinking that it was too early to be listening to that kind of thing, Amane focused on stuffing his face with the omelet his mother had made for breakfast.

It was tasty enough, but even so, he really did prefer Mahiru’s cooking—and not just because she was his girlfriend. Now that he was accustomed to Mahiru’s cooking, he found his mother’s food somewhat disappointing.

He looked over at Mahiru, thinking that he should ask her to make breakfast some other day, and saw her looking at his parents with a mixture of adoration, envy, and acute bashfulness.

Amane knew what she must be thinking and began feeling embarrassed, too.

…Of course, I don’t think we could ever be as lovey-dovey as those two…

Even so, he did think it would be nice if they could get that close, to have what Mahiru was imagining. He did want that, even though he couldn’t admit it out loud yet.

Looking again at his parents, who had always been affectionate toward one another, Amane imagined his own future someday and blushed slightly.

“Well, should we get going?”

Shortly after his parents left for work, Amane turned to Mahiru, who was sitting on the sofa.

It was still morning, and they weren’t planning on walking that far. They were just going to take a relaxed stroll around the neighborhood, so he figured they would easily make it back in time for lunch—Mahiru was planning to make carbonara. They would return to the house by midday, so they wouldn’t be outside for that long.

“Yep. I’m all ready.”

“Well, there’s not much to get ready for… We’re planning to go into town another time anyway, right?”

“…On a d-date?”

“Yeah. But today, we can take it easy.”

Amane figured Mahiru would want plenty of time to get ready for a real date. Today, they were just going on a simple outing. Even if it met the strictest definition of a date, it didn't feel like one for either of them.

A date was a special occasion, and Amane wanted to plan a whole day together. This was simply a casual stroll.

Mahiru couldn't conceal her delight at the idea of going on a date soon. She broke into a soft, euphoric smile.

"I'm looking forward to it."

"Mm. I still have to come up with a plan, so don't get too excited yet."

"I told you, as long as I'm with you, anywhere is fine."

"I know that, but since we're going to the trouble, I think it would be nice to go someplace that will make you happy."

Mahiru had told him that she was satisfied by just spending time together, and Amane could see that in her expression, too. Nevertheless, as her boyfriend, he wanted to impress her.

"Well, that's a discussion for next week. For now, let's go on a normal walk, shall we?"

"Yes."

Amane offered her his hand, and she accepted with a little squeeze.

That made him feel nervous, and he smiled a little to hide his embarrassment as they left the house, holding hands.

Even though Amane hadn't been home in about a year, the area around his childhood home hadn't changed much, and as he guided her down familiar streets, he began feeling a little nostalgic.

They continued holding hands as they walked, and people looked at Mahiru enviously as the young couple who looked the part of students on vacation passed by. Amane found this a little funny and laughed.

The stares alone were proof of what a beauty Mahiru was, which was a good thing, but the number of people who stopped to look was amusing.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Hmm? Because you're so beautiful. You're turning heads."

"Well, I can't help it if other people fall for me."

"And what if I fall in love?"

"…I'll let you stare as much as you want," Mahiru teased, smiling impishly.

"Well then, I'll have to look to my heart's content once we're home." Amane smiled, too, and pulled her by the hand into a nearby park.

The park was relatively spacious, with lots of greenery, so it was a place where people in the neighborhood came to relax.

In the large sandpit, kids played in the sand, screeching in their high-pitched voices, or took turns going down the slide that was next to the jungle gym. Their parents watched them from nearby benches and sometimes got up to play with their children.

Amane and Mahiru smiled a little at the very mundane, yet charming, scene.

"They're all so lively," she said.

"They look that way because we're not as energetic. We can't run around like that anymore."

"You never liked running anyway, did you, Amane-kun?"

"No, I don't mind it. I just hate it when we have to run at a particular pace, like in gym class."

Plenty of people disliked gym. Not all of them hated exercise, they just didn't like being forced to do it in front of others. Amane was like that. On his own, and moving at his own pace, he actually enjoyed exercising. He just hated the class.

"Hmm, maybe I'll go play with the children," Mahiru said.

"That might look weird, and you're not really dressed for it. Besides… What am I supposed to do while you leave me here?"

"You're right… But I think it looks kind of nice. I never got to play like that when I was little, so…"

Mahiru added that she had mostly played alone in her garden, and Amane squeezed her small hand again.

"…Still, maybe not right now, but, well, how do I put it? …Someday, I hope we do have a chance to play here."

"Huh? O-okay…?"

Mahiru didn't really seem to understand what Amane meant. But he didn't mind that she hadn't caught on to what he was implying. He figured they had plenty of time to talk about that sort of thing later, well after high school was over. He didn't need to pressure Mahiru into thinking about a future family—and anyway, he didn't think she would turn him down.

Mahiru had tilted her head in confusion, so Amane smiled and gently tugged at her hand. Staying in the shade as much as possible, they slowly walked through the park relaxing while gazing at the flowers blooming in the flowerbeds and enjoying the refreshing breeze that blew through the gaps in the trees.

Occasionally, one of the married women from the neighborhood would greet him as she passed. "Oh, aren't you the Fujimiya boy?" The women would smile and wish him well. It wasn't unpleasant, but it was rather awkward.

The two of them ambled around for a long time and eventually decided to take a break. They purchased drinks from a vending machine and settled down on a bench in the shade.

"Come to think of it, you're already totally used to my parents' house, aren't you, Mahiru?" Amane asked after taking a swig of his sports drink.

Mahiru blinked her caramel-colored eyes several times in surprise at the abrupt change in topic, then her face softened into a smile.

"Yes, I am, thanks to you all."

"Actually, you fit in better than I do."

"I—I do?"

"You do. Like it's already your home."

Mahiru blended in so well into the Fujimiya household that it was almost like she had belonged there from the beginning. Of course, Amane's parents were always affectionate, but Mahiru seemed to receive special attention. Even without Amane around, his parents doted on her so much it was like she was already their favorite daughter.

Mahiru, for her part, seemed to be growing more comfortable in their home.

"Are you enjoying your time at my house?" he asked.

"Yes. Heh-heh, it's really been nothing but fun since I arrived at the Fujimiya household. Your parents have been so kind to me."

"They're doting on you even more than I do."

"Amane-kun, you mustn't pout."

"I'm not pouting. Not while you're with me."

"…Okay."

Amane was glad to see that Mahiru was being welcomed into his home, even if it did mean that he was somewhat neglected. He was hopeful that eventually she might one day become a permanent member of the family.

Amane was happy as long as Mahiru was with him, and she had already shown him that she would always come back to him. So he didn't have a problem with his parents monopolizing her a bit. And he knew that once they returned to their apartments, he would be able to have her all to himself again.

Mahiru seemed embarrassed by Amane's words, and she pressed her forehead against his arm to hide her face. He reached out to stroke her hair, thinking that she was so cute when she did that.

"…Fujimiya?"

His hand stopped at the sound of someone's voice calling out to him.

When he looked up, he noticed someone else nearby. He had been so absorbed in his conversation with Mahiru that he hadn't seen the other person approaching.

Oh, that's right, I knew there was a chance I would see him if I came home.

The voice belonged to someone Amane had tried for the longest time to forget, even avoiding him in his dreams. He had left his hometown to get away from that person, although he'd always known that they might run into each other again someday.

In the recesses of his heart, Amane had been anticipating their meeting.

This time, however, Mahiru was there beside him, and Amane stayed calm and composed. He took a deep breath, letting his hand fall, and turned to face the voice—to face a boy who stood at the center of so many memories.

Chapter 15

Farewell to the Past

"It really is you, Fujimiya! I didn't know who you were for a second until I heard your name!" the boy who used to be Amane's friend said.

Toujou, who Amane no longer considered a friend, stood there staring at him. The last time Amane had seen Toujou's face was at their middle school graduation, and his appearance and attitude hadn't changed much since then.

On the other hand, Amane had changed a lot, on the outside and inside, over the two years that had passed since they had their falling out. And he had styled his hair and dressed up for the day's outing, so he certainly ought to have been difficult to recognize.

Ever since he had made his relationship with Mahiru official, Amane had felt like anybody who had known him before would scarcely believe that he was the same person. There was nothing surprising about Toujou's reaction.

Toujou wore the same irreverent smile he always had. Like Itsuki, he was a flashy, confident guy, but they didn't have anything in common otherwise. Sure, Itsuki liked to joke around, despite looking like a fresh-faced, agreeable young man. But Toujou had a genuinely cruel sense of humor.

At first, Toujou seemed a little uncomfortable with Amane's lack of response, but right away he broke into a broad smile.

"It's been a long time, huh, Fujimiya?"

"Yes, it has."

"You left home, didn't you? You're back now?"

"It's summer vacation, so I'm just visiting," Amane answered smoothly. "Glad to see you're looking well."

He had been able to answer more steadily than he would have expected, probably because he was surprised but not shaken.

Amane had already prepared himself for this possibility. His former friends still lived in their hometown, so of course they would be around. It was pure chance that he

had run into one of them like this, but now that he did not live near them, they were mere strangers with whom he had no real connection.

There was one small twinge of resentment in his chest when he thought of the past, but when he felt Mahiru's warmth by his side, that unhappiness seemed to dissolve.

"So what's with the girl?" Toujou asked. "Don't tell me you're out here picking up chicks?"

"Of course not; no way. This is my girlfriend."

"Hmm?"

Toujou gave Mahiru an appraising look. He didn't appear too amused by the word *girlfriend*.

Toujou had an expression that Amane had seen sometimes when they'd been friends. He knew what that look meant right away.

It was the face Toujou made when someone else had something that he didn't have.

"Aren't you all grown-up, with your girlfriend? The crybaby with the cute face turned into a man after all, huh?" Toujou smirked as he teased him, but Amane didn't think much of it.

Amane had expected the words to hurt, but he didn't feel a thing. It was like a gentle breeze had blown past, no force behind it at all. Instead, he was more worried about whether Mahiru was getting angry at Toujou's mockery.

He glanced over and saw Mahiru blinking.

Then she broke into a broad smile.

Mahiru's smiles came in several different varieties, but despite their close relationship, Amane didn't recognize the one she was wearing. It was different from the smile she had worn when Amane had been belittled on Sports Day and from the one she had used on the guys who had tried to pick her up at the pool. The emotions behind this smile were unreadable. Amane felt a little uneasy seeing it. He wasn't sure if he should be relieved or worried.

Toujou, on the other hand, grinned with satisfaction.

"So, new girlfriend, did you know this? Fujimiya's not too bad-looking now, but years ago everyone used to tease him for having a girly face until he cried."

The malicious words didn't surprise Amane in the least.

"How very nostalgic," he muttered.

With Mahiru beside him, holding his hand, Amane thought that, in the end, Toujou was just another ordinary guy from his past.

Toujou had always been physically bigger than Amane, and smart and cheerful, the kind of guy who always said what was on his mind. And he'd always had lots of

friends. That made it much harder for Amane when Toujou, with his many advantages, betrayed him and bad-mouthed Amane behind his back. Amane had suffered terribly because of Toujou's abuse.

Now his mind was calm. It wasn't that he didn't care, but rather that he felt as if he had gained more perspective. Things like that happened, and faced with it now, Amane did not flinch or tremble like he had back then.

Toujou's cheeks reddened slightly, and his gaze grew sharp. He seemed rattled by Amane's composed response.

"You seem awfully calm… Hey, girlfriend, what do you see in a guy like this? His only redeeming feature is his family. Do you know how uncool he used to look?"

Toujou switched his focus to Mahiru and started talking to her, but she looked back at him with her unchanging gentle smile.

"I've heard everything from Amane-kun already. Although, I didn't know that he had such a cute face and everything…"

"I didn't tell you because then you'd want to see the photos."

"Heh-heh, I've already seen them, though… And they were adorable," Mahiru added in a quiet voice.

Amane shot her an exasperated look, and she responded with an honest smile for just a moment before reverting to her inscrutable angelic visage.

Amane smirked a little at Toujou, who was frozen in place for a second by Mahiru's smile.

"I don't really care; you can say whatever you like. It's just your perception. I'm not afraid of you anymore, and I'm confident that my girlfriend's feelings aren't going to change because of something bad you say about me."

Amane had nothing to fear from Toujou, because now he had a loving and supportive partner. The past was behind him, and it was nothing more than a healed wound.

He had the love of his life by his side and wasn't afraid of anything.

"As far as I'm concerned, everything that happened back then is over, Toujou."

So no matter what you say, it can't hurt me—that was the meaning behind the look in his eyes as he stared at Toujou calmly.

Toujou's eyes bulged as he appeared irritated by Amane's placid demeanor. But before he could open his mouth, Mahiru opened hers.

"…Come to think of it, you were asking what I see in him, weren't you?"

Mahiru stood up beside Amane, stretched to her full height, and stared Toujou down. He winced ever so slightly in the face of her captivating intensity.

Her eyes weren't cold so much as lacking in warmth, and her calm, but keen, sharp gaze bored into Toujou.

"Do you choose who you associate with based on money? Do you pick your friends by whether they have any value? You'll never get a single thing you want by choosing like that, and I doubt you'll ever be satisfied."

"Wha…?"

"I have money, but I've never truly been satisfied… I have money, but my heart was always cold," Mahiru said quietly, gently placing her hand over her heart.

Amane felt a tight pressure building in his chest.

As far as social standing, Mahiru was surely blessed. Her household was wealthy enough to employ a housekeeper, and everything she owned was high quality. She had told him that the only thing her parents gave her was money. For that reason, Mahiru didn't attach much importance to wealth. Rather, she sought human warmth instead.

Toujou hadn't been able to hurt Amane, but he felt pain in his chest when he thought about Mahiru's circumstances, which showed how little Toujou mattered to him now.

"When I met Amane-kun, my heart was filled with happiness for the first time. So what I see in him doesn't have anything to do with money or even looks. It's what's inside that matters. I don't think anything else is important," Mahiru asserted.

Without pitying or dismissing Toujou, she held his reflection in her intently calm eyes. "If wealth is all that matters to you, that's fine, I suppose," she continued. "I'm not trying to deny other people's priorities in life. But to me, Amane-kun has more value than any other person, and as long as he understands that, it's good enough for me."

Her angelic smile transformed into her true smile as she looked at Amane.

That brought him great relief.

"That's plenty, Mahiru," Amane said.

"But—"

"No, listen, I'm getting really embarrassed from hearing you say all that…but it does make me happy. You can tell me all that stuff when we're alone together."

"…Okay."

If he'd let her, Mahiru would have probably moved on to listing everything she liked about Amane. But her enchanting smiles were wasted on Toujou, who was less than a stranger to him now.

"Thank you," he whispered quietly as he stood up and took a step to stand in front of Mahiru.

Facing Toujou now, everything that had happened before seemed very distant. Years ago, Toujou had seemed so dazzling and huge, he had looked so frightening, but Amane had grown a lot, physically and mentally, and he wasn't afraid of him anymore.

He didn't have to look up at him anymore, either. When Amane straightened up and faced Toujou, he actually had to look down a little. Amane didn't tremble in the least, even with Toujou staring right at him.

"Toujou," Amane said his name quietly.

"Wh-what is it?" came the flustered response.

…I really have gotten past it, huh?

Amane didn't feel anything looking at Toujou. He really had let go of the past. Amane was calm, something he never could have imagined when he left his hometown because he feared confronting the other boy.

Behind him, Mahiru sensed Amane's mood and didn't try to stop him.

I guess it's time to make a stand.

A stand against the past that I tried to ignore, and against Toujou, the symbol of it all, and against the weak version of me who was hurt back then.

In a certain sense, coming back home may have been fate. It gave me the chance to put these things behind me.

Toujou looked flustered at Amane's cool demeanor. He looked like he was wondering what Amane was going to say.

Seeing Toujou like that, Amane smiled a little.

"At this point, I feel kind of grateful to you. You used me and afterward cut me off, but even so, I had some fun back then, and I enjoyed your company."

Amane didn't have any intention of airing his grievances to Toujou. In the past, he had been hurt and had suffered—but he had learned, since then, to accept it as just another kind of experience. One that had been a key part of his development.

Amane liked who he was now. He'd met Mahiru and started a wonderful relationship.

"So in the end, I'm glad I spent time with you guys. Because of it, I was able to meet Mahiru. Actually, I think you using me was good for both of us. You did hurt me, but I think I probably became a bigger person because I was able to overcome what happened. It was hard, but I found something important, and it's all thanks to you guys."

In a certain sense, Toujou, and the rest of Amane's former friends who were not present, had been major factors that had led him to Mahiru.

And now they were no more and no less.

"Thank you… Now, I've got nothing more to do with you and nothing else to talk about, so that's all I have to say."

His words of thanks were also words of parting.

Amane didn't have any desire or even a reason to get involved with Toujou. Amane lived in another town and went to another school. He was planning to go to university there, too. Attending different schools, they would go on to live in different places and learn different things. Toujou was just someone he used to be friends with and was now a stranger.

Toujou stiffened as if he had been hit by a bolt of lightning when he heard these words coming straight from Amane's heart.

Amane turned his back to him.

All the lingering discomfort he felt toward the other boy had melted away.

"Well, Mahiru, shall we go?"

"Yes."

"Mm."

He took Mahiru's hand, feeling faintly embarrassed.

Mahiru had already lost any interest in Toujou and was looking only at Amane.

Amane gave Mahiru a small, wry smile, and without looking back, as if he did not care for the former friend who was not yet far behind, they left the park together.

That evening, Amane closed his eyes in bed and waited for sleep to find him. But as he lay there, he did not feel sleepy. Amane usually never had trouble falling asleep, but that night he couldn't even catch a moment's rest. He was strangely alert.

He knew it was probably because of his encounter with Toujou earlier in the day.

His former friend was one of the people who had caused Amane a lot of heartache, but Amane no longer held even a small fragment of ill feeling or uneasiness in his heart toward those boys.

He felt refreshed after encountering Toujou and even a little emotional over it.

Meeting Mahiru and spending time with her, earning her trust and support, had helped him grow a lot. He felt indescribably moved by it.

...I'm glad I got out of this town like Dad suggested.

If he had remained there, Amane would have never gotten over his past and wouldn't have matured like he had. He probably would have pretended not to see his pain and would have lived his whole life trying to ignore it.

Everything was thanks to Mahiru, Itsuki, and the rest of them. Gratitude toward his friends and the pleasant realization that he had finally overcome his past filled Amane's chest.

But it didn't seem like he was going to get any sleep. So Amane decided to take in the outside air and got up, put on his slippers, and went out onto the veranda.

The moment he opened the door, the hot, uncomfortably humid air rushed into the air-conditioned room behind him. It was nighttime, but the evenings had been sweltering for several days in a row.

Even so, the sky was clear, and he could easily see the stars now that he was away from the lights of the city. It was the perfect setting to kill time and boredom until he got sleepy.

While Amane was leaning against the railing, enjoying the quiet atmosphere and the twinkling of the stars, there was a sudden sound of a sliding door being opened.

It wasn't coming from his own room. When he turned toward the noise that came from the other room connected to the veranda, he saw Mahiru dressed in a long nightgown, poking half her body out to look at him.

"…Mahiru, you're still awake?"

He had never expected her to still be up.

The night was late, and his family was fast asleep, plus Mahiru had told him that she kept a regular schedule and always went to sleep before midnight. It was surprising that she was still up—and moreover that she would step out onto the balcony.

"Somehow, I just couldn't sleep… What about you, Amane-kun? I guess you couldn't, either, huh?"

"Mm… There was a lot of stuff on my mind."

"…I guess so."

Mahiru was out on the veranda now, too, and she cast her eyes slightly downward when she heard him say those words, so Amane smiled wryly. "It's not that I'm not over

what happened, you know? I think it was just a lot for me to come face-to-face with those strong feelings and realize how much I've matured."

Mahiru didn't need to worry about that.

He wasn't thinking about Toujou anymore. He was just appreciating how much he had changed. Toujou's face hadn't so much as flitted through his mind. Amane wasn't threatened by him anymore.

Mahiru looked relieved when Amane told her this with a smile, and she put on a small one of her own.

"Heh-heh… You've become stronger, Amane-kun, and grown up, too. Not to mention, it sounds like you've gotten a lot taller since middle school."

"Mm, I guess so. I've grown about twenty centimeters since my first year of middle school."

"That's amazing."

"Yeah."

Amane had definitely changed. His height was one thing, but in the past year, his mental state and his perspective on everything had shifted, too.

Thinking about it now, he saw that in the past he had been unsociable, cynical, and rude. His former friends hadn't been entirely at fault, but it was still a fact that Amane had not made it easy for anyone to get to know him.

He thought his current self was more composed than before.

The reason for that composure was because of the beloved girl by his side.

"It's like you said, Amane-kun. You have matured. Mentally and physically."

"…I guess I have."

"You're more confident now, right?"

"Yeah."

"That's good, then. Even if you lose your confidence, I'll support you."

"I'm grateful for that, truly."

Mahiru smiled gently and looked at the sky, placing her hands on the railing beside him. Her loveliness threatened to overwhelm him.

Mahiru nestled close to Amane and smiled. By his side, she supported him. She encouraged him. This incredibly lovely, precious person wanted to be with him.

"…Hey, Mahiru?"

"Yes?"

"…I want to touch you."

"Huh?"

Mahiru turned slowly toward him at these abrupt words. She looked surprised, mostly, and Amane felt embarrassed, but he didn't want to retract his request. He stared into Mahiru's eyes as she shook with bewilderment.

"…I feel like I want to touch you; is that bad?"

He very much wanted to.

He wanted to feel the warmth of this girl who loved him, cared for him, and supported him. He wanted time to really appreciate her being there with him.

Under Amane's direct stare, her caramel-colored eyes wavered, then looked down in embarrassment.

"…It's not bad," she answered quietly.

Amane felt the warmth within his chest grow again.

As he was still taking in Mahiru's acceptance, Amane extended a hand toward her.

But he was hesitant to embrace her there on the veranda, so he just touched her palm.

As they walked together, Amane took her hand, which was so delicate, yet had always encouraged him and guided him. He led her into his room.

It was late at night, so he closed the door quietly, and Mahiru sat down on the bed.

There was no sofa in the room, so the bed was the only place for her to sit. But the moment she sat down, Mahiru's body stiffened, and she looked at him awkwardly, which made him smile in spite of himself.

"I'm not going to do anything," he assured her.

"O-okay."

"Were you expecting me to?"

"Th-that's not what I thought at all."

"In that case, I have some complicated feelings, as a man."

"Huh?"

"Just joking… Right now, I just want to feel you, Mahiru."

Mahiru looked nervous for a second, but Amane wasn't intending to do anything that she had to worry about. He wanted her full consent—when she was ready to give it. He would never force her into anything.

Mahiru finally relaxed, and Amane slowly wrapped his arms around her. She returned the embrace, and his chest steadily filled with indescribable euphoria from her softness and familiar sweet smell. Feeling the love well up inside him again, he squeezed Mahiru tight to have his fill of her.

In his arms, Mahiru closed her eyes pleasantly.

She didn't say out loud that she was happy, but a satisfied smile crept across her face, and she seemed content, so Amane was sure that Mahiru felt the same way he did.

…I love her so much…

Day by day, the feelings deep in his heart keep growing, filling him with passion and joy from head to toe.

Even when he thought he couldn't possibly love Mahiru any more, his feelings grew steadily stronger and more ardent, and he knew they would probably never disappear. Just like his parents, his feelings of love would only deepen. His love would be gentle, elegant, and dazzling, and it could transform into a deeper love that would never fade or dissipate.

He loved her, truly from the bottom of his heart.

Filled with irrepressible emotion, Amane spontaneously lifted Mahiru's chin and gave her beguiling lips a kiss.

He saw her caramel-colored eyes blink dramatically up close. Then, the next moment, a dull pain hit his forehead. He pulled his face away from the impact.

This time it was Amane's turn to blink, as he recoiled from the steadily spreading pain. Mahiru, the probable source, looked obviously bewildered, her eyes wavering unsteadily.

"…Ow!"

"S-sorry! You surprised me."

"N-no, I'm the one who suddenly… I'm sorry."

He realized she had bumped into him in her surprise, and he couldn't possibly blame her. He was the one who had kissed her without her permission.

From Mahiru's reaction, Amane thought regretfully that he ought to have held out a little bit longer. Her eyes darted around the room, and she hunched over.

"I—I didn't dislike it, so…you just really startled me, is all… Um… T-try once more, please. It'll be all right this time."

Her shy voice trembled, but she squeezed her eyes shut and turned her face upward, arranging herself into a posture ready to accept a kiss. Amane smiled a little and obliged her.

With no bump on the head to drive him back, he took advantage of the fact that Mahiru was accepting the kiss to really savor it.

Her lips were softer and juicier than his own.

He was suddenly worried about whether his own lips were dry and causing Mahiru any discomfort, but she didn't seem displeased, not that he could see. She was shaking a little as if he was tickling her as he nibbled at her softly, and he found her indescribably precious.

He pulled away for a moment, but Mahiru was so cute, and his desire to continue overruled his self-control, so he pressed his lips against hers again.

He heard a muffled groan and couldn't tell if it was conveying surprise or objection, but in an attempt to soothe her, he gently caressed her lips, then settled into giving her lots of little pecks.

Sometimes he garnished his kisses with small happy sounds.

He narrowed his eyes, thinking how cute she was, and gently kissed her repeatedly, holding her petite body in his arms.

After tasting her lips again and again, he eventually did pull away, and Mahiru buried her face in Amane's shoulder.

"…Y-you didn't ask me if you could do it so many times."

"D-did you hate it?"

"N-no. I just wasn't ready…and I'm embarrassed, is all… It's my first time," she whispered quietly.

Amane heard another meaning in those words, and his heart skipped a beat.

"…Amane-kun, was that really your first kiss? You seemed more confident than me."

"Not at all… I just—I wanted to kiss you so much I couldn't stand it, so maybe I was a bit pushy…"

"N-no, it wasn't bad… I knew you were going to do it, so it was fine… D-do it some more now," she said with her eyes turned upward. Not even Amane was enough of a wimp to refuse her.

Even as he kissed Mahiru again, he tried to match her pace and forced himself to take it slow. He placed his palm on the back of Mahiru's head, and she didn't pull away.

When Amane shifted to get a better angle to enjoy her soft lips, he noticed his heart beating so hard it was practically deafening.

"…Heh-heh." Mahiru laughed quietly in the interval between kisses and placed her hand on Amane's chest. Holding Amane at bay, she looked up at him. "…Before I fell for you, Amane-kun, I wondered what the point of kissing was. But as someone who loves you from the bottom of my heart, it makes me incredibly happy."

"…Are you happy now?"

"Yes."

"…Me too."

"Heh-heh, then we agree."

Mahiru seemed embarrassed, but she put on a carefree smile. He kissed her once more, and as he was tasting the slight sweetness of her lips, he felt her body tremble slightly.

Worried he had made her uncomfortable, he backed away, but Mahiru smiled awkwardly. “It’s fine”—she drew her body in closer to him—“you’re nice and warm,” she whispered.

“…Are you cold?”

“I guess I am; the timer on the air conditioner doesn’t seem to have cut off yet, so…”

The air-conditioning was actually set to a higher temperature than it was during the day, but even so, the room was fairly chilly. It would shut off eventually, several hours after they went to sleep, but at the moment, Mahiru must have been cold in her thin nightgown.

After all, her arms were exposed in short sleeves. It was no wonder she was freezing.

"If you like, maybe I could warm you up?"

"Oh, would you please?"

He had asked in jest, but Mahiru unexpectedly took him up on the offer.

"What do you want me to do?"

"What do you think I want you to do?"

"I wonder, what could it be?"

"Take your best guess."

"…You're not gonna let me off easy, eh, Mahiru?"

"Heh-heh, not this time."

"Sure, sure. All right then, how about I do this, since that's how you're going to be?"

Still holding Mahiru tight, Amane fell over onto the bed.

In his arms, flaxen hair fluttered down softly, and caramel-colored eyes opened wide in surprise.

After kissing Mahiru's cheek again when she was frozen stiff, Amane covered their bodies with the large terry cloth blanket draped over the side of the bed. Finally seeming to realize what had happened, Mahiru brought her face closer to Amane's chest.

"This way, we'll both be warm."

"…Yes."

"I can also provide my arm as a pillow, as an optional service."

He offered his arm to her, and with a small smile, Mahiru hesitantly rested her head on it.

Seeing her face so close, Amane smiled. Then Mahiru's smile transformed into something a little more impish.

"Now that I've taken you up on the optional service, is there a cost?"

"A very special price, just for you, Mahiru. You've got to make omelets for tomorrow's breakfast."

"All right, I'm in."

"You're already tucked in, aren't you?"

The two of them laughed together, and Amane wrapped his other free arm around Mahiru's back and closed his eyes, embracing her.

Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up this book.

I am Saekisan, your author. I trust you enjoyed *The Angel Next Door*, Vol. 5?

So this volume starts after our two lovebirds begin dating. But just because their relationship has changed doesn't mean everything else has suddenly changed, too. Thus, this book depicts them getting closer to one another bit by bit.

Well, if Amane-kun had suddenly transformed into the kind of guy who is ready and raring to go, no one would have recognized him, so personally, I think that this was more appropriate for his character. Even so, he deserves some praise for growing out of his worthlessness just a little bit.

And as for the angelic and devilish Mahiru-san, ultimately her inexperience came to light, and she got outwitted by Amane-kun a couple of times, so I think we'll see more of naive Mahiru-san from now on. I'm looking forward to seeing how she's depicted in Hanekoto-sensei's incredible illustrations, eh-heh-heh.

That's right, the illustrations by Hanekoto-sensei were magnificent, again. Maybe too cute???

The cover is refreshing and perfect for the season when this book goes on sale. Really, it's so nice that I want to put it in a frame and hang it on my wall. How about printing multiple copies?

Also, Amane-kun's too handsome now, like it makes me want to sit him down for an hour and interrogate him. "Why did everyone think you were a nerd…?" Though I am very grateful that he's been drawn to look so cool by Hanekoto's capable hands!

I'm really looking forward to the illustrations in subsequent volumes, too. There are so many scenes I want to see…

Well then, we've come to the end, but I want to thank all the people who supported me.

To the head editor who rendered their services for the publication of this book, to everyone in the editorial department at GA Books and in the sales department, to the

proofreaders, to Hanekoto, to those at the printing office, and to all of you who have picked up this book, truly, thank you very much.

Let's meet again in the next volume. There's going to be a next one. Probably.

Thank you very much for reading to the end!